The New Criterion

June 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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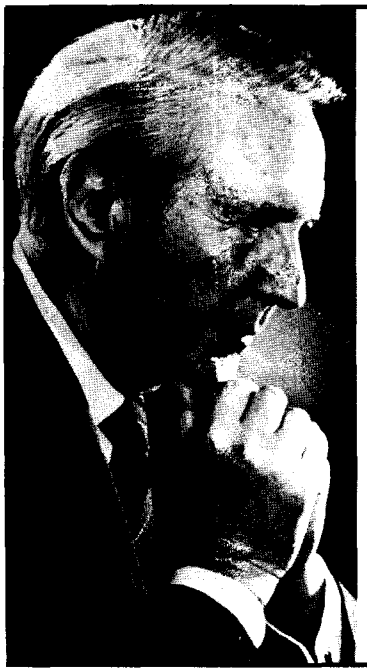

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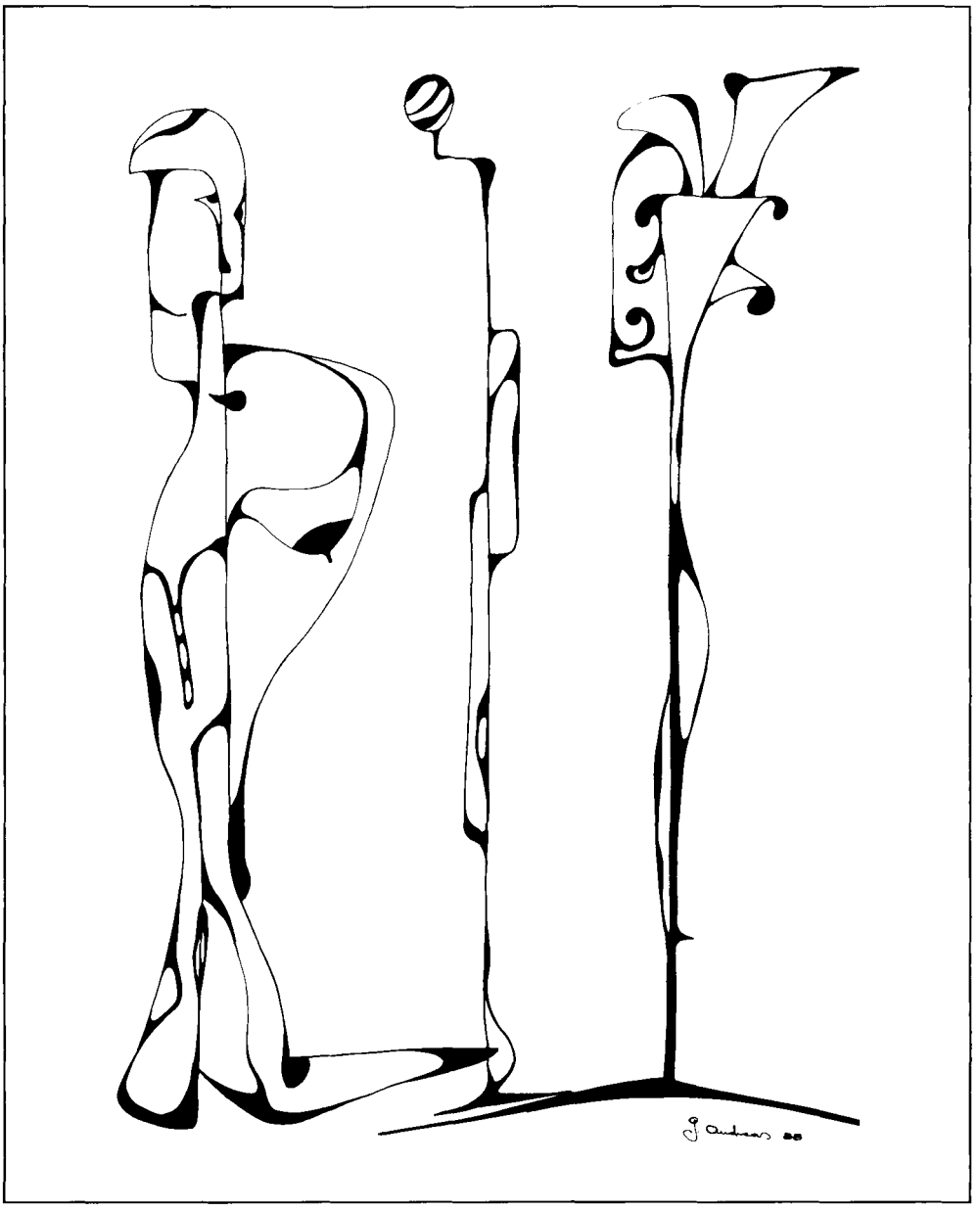

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Notes & Comments: June 1992

Sexual politics at MIT

It is no secret that the demand for political correctness has more than a whiff of the totalitarian about it. There is, first of all, a blatant disregard for what is contemptuously described as "empirical reality" in the name of slogan-like "ideals" ("diversity," "sensitivity," "ethnic pride," etc.). Then there is the tendency to transform every contested matter of fact into a question of personal motivation and character: if you disagree with me you are a traitor to the cause. There is also a deliberate vagueness about aims and goals that allows one to contradict oneself with impunity while constantly raising the ante on one's demands. And, finally, there is a generalized cynicism, at least among leaders, that encourages one to regard every matter of principle as a power struggle. The movement for political correctness has not—not yet—turned murderous, but such telltale markers characterize it as surely as they characterized the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century.

Even as we write, a splendid illustration of political correctness at work is unfolding at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology —not, thank goodness, among the scientists or engineers, but, as usual, among the "humanists," the professors of literature. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, a noted scholar of American literature and a tenured professor at MIT's School of Humanities, has filed suit against her employer for breach of contract. According to a complaint dated April 7, 1992, Professor Wolff is seeking damages for MIT's "acquiescence in and perpetuation of a persistent and continuing pattern of professional, political and sexual harassment." The complaint proceeds to detail both the obloquy and ostracism that Professor Wolff has allegedly suffered at the hands of her politically correct colleagues as well as MIT's consistent refusal to intervene effectively on her behalf.

What makes this case more than business as usual in the PC-haven of the academy is Professor Wolff's own impeccable credentials as a feminist scholar. A specialist in the works of Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton, she has long been an advocate of Women's Studies, Cultural Studies, and other up-to-date items on the academic multicultural menu. *The New York Times* noted in its recent report on the case that Professor Wolff considers herself a "progressive feminist." "Progressive," perhaps, but obviously not progressive enough. As the *Times* conceded, Professor Wolff "still believed in applying traditional scholarly standards in her academic work." And this retrograde belief, at least for some of her colleagues at MIT, was enough to brand her as that unspeakable thing, a "neo-conservative."

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Professor Wolff's commitment to traditional scholarly standards has shown itself not only in her scholarly work but also in her behavior regarding promotion and tenure. Although she is apparently a firm believer in affirmative action, Professor Wolff has nonetheless based her judgment of candidates for appointment or promotion on their scholarly credentials, not their politics. According to the complaint, her votes against granting tenure to various politically correct candidates have won her the lasting enmity of certain powerful colleagues who have embarked upon, as the complaint charges, "an unrelenting campaign of verbal abuse and isolation," refusing to allow Professor Wolff to teach in the Women Studies Program, denying her release time, spreading groundless rumors to impugn her integrity, and bad-mouthing her to junior colleagues as "poison."

Professor Wolff, along with Irene Tayler, a colleague in the Literature Section, has also had the temerity to object to allowing hiring decisions to degenerate into a kind of pimping service for the faculty. As her complaint reports, "twice, in two different years, Professor David Halperin, an outspoken advocate of gay and lesbian views, demanded that the [Literature] Section interview a specific candidate because he said he was 'in love' with the candidate. When Professors Wolff and Tayler expressed opposition to this rationale for hiring, Professor Halperin verbally attacked them for expressing 'homophobic' attitudes." According to *The New York Times*, Professor Halperin admitted making this comment but insisted that he did so "in the interest of full disclosure" and did not mean that MIT "should hire [the candidate] because I was in love with him." Be that as it may, it is worth noting that at least one assistant professor—a male—has repeatedly complained of being sexually harassed by Professor Halperin, and has confided to Professor Wolff that he was worried his complaints might compromise his opportunities for advancement. Professor Halperin has denied any wrongdoing. But when an independent committee was set up to investigate the case, it found that the tenure decision of the person in question had unfolded in a 'context of malice and destructive behavior.'"

In short, MIT has provided the public with a new and unusually grisly chapter in the continuing saga of sexual intimidation and political correctness on campus. It is a story in which cultural politics and sexual preference have insinuated themselves into the center of decisions that by rights should be based on an examination of scholarly qualifications. As her complaint states, Professor Woolf found herself in a situation in which "all aspects of the personnel process—hiring, reappointment, and tenure decisions—had become so egregious and vicious that responsible professional behavior had become impossible," a situation in which the faculty had fallen "into a chaotic state in which the sheer exercise of power governed the behavior of many of its members, and all forms of process and procedure had been abandoned." It would be nice if we could believe that this latest episode of the academic PC-follies at MIT were unique or even rare. Unfortunately, all indications are that this sordid display is merely a glimpse of things to come.

The NEA comes to the Metropolitan

An *ad hoc* group called "New Yorkers for the National Endowment for the Arts" held a ginger meeting on May 11 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to drum up support for the beleaguered agency. The ostensible purposes of the gathering were to introduce New York arts advocates to Anne-Imelda Radice, the NEA's new acting chairman, and to see a short video, narrated by Walter Cronkite, in support of the endowment. The meeting was presided over by such notable NEA backers as John Brademas, the former congressman who was responsible for much of the agency's legislative success

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in the 1970s, and William H. Luers, the president of the Metropolitan, whose wife, Wendy, is a very active member of the National Council on the Arts, the NEA's advisory board.

Perhaps the longest speech was given by pollster Louis Harris, who announced, to warm approval, the results of his latest survey of public attitudes toward federal arts subsidies. Harris seemed thrilled that support for these subsidies had gone up from 48 percent in 1974 to 59 percent in 1987, and had now reached the high level of 60 percent. Harris was particularly enthusiastic about his poll's finding that 52 percent of the American people now supported aid to individual artists, the first time that a majority had so expressed itself; for Harris, this rise in sympathy for individual artists was a "sharp and bitter" response to the attack on these artists that had been so prominent in the wider attack on the NEA over the past several years. Otherwise, the speeches were short, and even Radice had little more to say than that she felt it was significant that the first event in support of the NEA was taking place at the Metropolitan Museum.

There was but one slight note of discord on this harmonious occasion: a questioner from the floor asked what Radice's position was on supporting "difficult art." This question, clearly referring to the grants for provocative sexual and sacrilegious art that have fueled recent opposition to the NEA, seemed calculated to put the new acting chairman in an uncomfortable position before the very partisan invited audience; everyone present surely suspected that at that very time she was in the process of deciding to reject a grant of $10,000 to MIT, approved by an 11-1 vote at the last Council meeting, for an exhibition containing, *inter alia*, images of human genitalia. But the questioner was in effect gaveled down, and Radice was spared the problem of speaking, in an unfriendly environment, to the key issue convulsing federal arts policy today.

In the event, the gathering came to an end not with the bang of Mapplethorpe and MIT but with the whimper of Walter Cronkite doing what he has always done best —reading a prepared script. The almost ten-minute-long video left few tears unjerked as it moved through countless brief images of "the arts" in their broadest contemporary definition. The video pointed out that the NEA had practiced multiculturalism before it became a trendy word. There were action shots of orchestra musicians, every kind of ballet, folk, and modern dancer, folk and ethnic performers, museums, art classes, and everywhere great numbers of scrubbed, appealing, bright-eyed, and attractive children. On this video, the NEA was the mother of all America's arts, the sponsor of all its artists, and the teacher of all its children.

Insofar as the video had a soloist, it was the rhythm-and-blues star Ray Charles, who kept chanting the name "America." There was nary a word—or, God forbid, a picture —about the great debate as to whether government should be in the business of supporting art, or what passes for art, that even sophisticated art lovers find offensive. Nor was there anything about the NEA's original mandate to conserve the greatest artistic treasures of the past. The achievements of high art and the task of sustaining them were lost in this pageant of praise for cultural populism. Instead, everything was reduced to warm and smiling faces. Under the new dispensation, sanctified by Walter Cronkite, one may be pardoned for thinking that the purpose of the video, like that of the Metropolitan Museum meeting that introduced it, was to con a gullible American people into thinking that here, in what used to be the austere majesty of a great art museum, was nothing more than bedtime cookies-and-milk. Some cookies, some milk. But then, too, some bedtime.

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Abolishing art at the Whitney

by Roger Kimball

The Whitney Museum of American Art is inviting more than 1,000 educators and community leaders to an open house. . . . The informal opening will provide the Museum's Education Department an occasion to . . . demonstrate the opportunities available to utilize the Whitney Museum's great resources for art education at all levels. . . . The Whitney Museum offers one of the most stimulating programs of any art museum in New York. . . . [It] has built nationally recognized education programs that include the Artreach Program for New York City Public Schools, a docent program, teachers' workshops, Seminars with Artists, symposia on issues in contemporary art, the annual Whitney Symposium on American Art & Culture, panel discussions, and lectures.
—From a museum press release, May 1992

If quantity were quality, American cultural life in the 1990s would be putting Periclean Athens to shame. Never has there been so much art for so many. Never have so many involved themselves in the arts. Our schools teach art appreciation and boast state- and federally funded programs to unlock the creativity inside every first- and second-grader. Later, the National Endowment for the Arts and allied agencies take over, offering artists of every description public funds to pursue their divers visions. Countless radio and television programs, commercially as well as publicly funded, bring an unimaginable array of cultural endeavor right into our dens and living rooms. Colleges and universities across the land have recognized the importance of the arts and have established myriad courses, programs, and institutes to encourage students and faculty members to explore the art of our time. Performing-arts centers have sprouted in every municipality to bring the latest in avant-garde dance, music, and theater to a curious public. And the museums! Even in today's troubled economic climate, new museums continue to open in many cities while scores of established arts institutions are still in the midst of or have only recently completed ambitious programs of expansion.

Nor are these new museums the fusty, elitist institutions of olden days, obsessed with the preservation and exhibition of great art. As the epigraph from a recent Whitney Museum press release suggests—and as anyone who has spent much time in museums these days knows from firsthand experience—the contemporary art museum places a premium on education. From coast to coast, busloads of schoolchildren can be found on the floors of museum galleries, huddling restlessly in front of everything from the Old Masters to the latest fashions in contemporary art as a teacher or museum docent swaddles them with well-meaning patter. At the same time, tours for older students and adults surge through the galleries in groups of fifteen or twenty, carefully avoiding the youngsters and accompanied by a teacher or museum docent who swaddles them with different but equally well-

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meaning patter. In blockbuster exhibitions, thousands upon thousands of art lovers file quickly past paintings while attending carefully to the soothing voice of a curator, museum director, or show-business celebrity explaining the works in a specially prepared audio tape. Then, too, as the press release from the Whitney reminds us, there are sundry teachers' workshops, seminars, symposia, panel discussions, and lectures: an embarrassment, you might think, of riches.

No doubt, some of these efforts are more responsible and serious than others. And if some seem fundamentally misconceived—the practice of herding groups of ten-year-olds through exhibitions, for example, or the ever-more-popular fad of supplying visitors with an audio "tour"—other recent innovations may be seen to perform legitimate educational functions. Nevertheless, the explosion of interest in "the arts"—or what we might better term the explosion of interest in the *idea* of being interested in the arts—confronts us with a host of questions and anomalies. For one thing, it is by no means clear that the immensely greater access to art and information about art that we enjoy today has actually led to a greater or more thoughtful appreciation of art. There are, to be sure, not only more museums and concert halls than ever before, but also more publications and reproductions, more recordings, more video tapes, more computerized databases, etc. And yet the ease of access that economic prosperity and advanced communications have made possible often seem to breed superficiality and ennui more than passion and genuine engagement. Already in the 1960s, W. H. Auden noted the trivialization that such abundance can engender. "While it is a great blessing," he wrote in *Secondary Worlds*,

> that a man no longer has to be rich in order to enjoy the masterpieces of the past, for paperbacks, first-rate color reproductions and stereo-phonograph records have made them available to all but the very poor, this ease of access, if misused—and we do misuse it—can become a curse. We are all of us tempted to read more books, look at more pictures, listen to more music than we can possibly absorb, and the result of such gluttony is not a cultured mind but a consuming one; what it reads, looks at, listens to is immediately forgotten, leaving no more traces behind than yesterday's newspaper.

Moreover, if cultural gluttony presents us with one set of problems, cultural confusion presents us with another. This shows up immediately when we ask ourselves why we care about the arts in the first place. The answers typically provided by the fund-raising letters, membership drives, and other appeals for support with which we are inundated today are no less true for being composed of clichés. At some basic level, we lavish so much attention and money upon the arts because we believe—or want to believe—that without art human life is diminished in important if incalculable ways; we believe or want to believe that aesthetic experience affords emotional and spiritual satisfactions not otherwise obtainable.

The problem with such laudable if hoary convictions is that so much in the contemporary cultural situation contradicts them. For if the public face of the cultural establishment still appeals to the liberating quality of aesthetic experience, then what we might call the professional face of the cultural establishment increasingly mocks those appeals as naïve, covertly "hegemonic," or otherwise unsavory. Indeed, we more and more find that the custodians of our greatest cultural institutions—universities, museums, orchestras, and theaters—wind up despising the cultural heritage that they have been trained to preserve and pass on. Oh, yes: the old-fashioned appeals to the beneficence of art and culture are routinely issued when the public must be dunned for support. But the activities sponsored by our cultural institutions—especially the "sophisticated" activities sponsored by our elite institutions—often have more to do with abolishing than nurturing the life of art and culture. In the university, the subversion of the humanities by multiculturalism, "Cultural

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Studies," and the clotted rhetoric ushered in by deconstruction has rendered the traditional idea of a liberal-arts education all but anachronistic at many institutions. In the art world, kindred pressures have worked to undermine interest in aesthetic achievement in order to promote an "art" devoted to political protest and radical attitudinizing.

If the implications of these developments were broadly appreciated, the public would undoubtedly be quick to withdraw its support. For what we are talking about here is not scholarship or art that is merely "difficult" or esoteric. (The American public long ago learned to indulge what it did not understand with tolerant, and often munificent, neglect.) On the contrary, what we are talking about are beliefs and activities that seek to destroy an entire way of life: the essentially liberal, bourgeois way of life that has struggled to establish itself wherever advanced capitalist societies have thrived.

It is rare, though, that this nihilistic side of contemporary cultural life declares itself frankly and receives widespread scrutiny. And when it does—as in some of the controversial projects supported by the National Endowment for the Arts in recent years—the issue is immediately obscured by the introduction of two red herrings: the ideal of free speech and the contention that important new art must be "challenging," i.e., subversive in some aesthetic, moral, political, or spiritual sense. The issue of free speech is a red herring in this context because there is no reason to assume that the essentially political demand for free expression should automatically neutralize or trump all moral and aesthetic concerns when one is dealing with works of art. Similarly, there is no reason to think that new art must be subversive to be important. Most of artistic history argues against it. And while the idea has its roots in Romanticism, it is really only since the unexpected triumph of Pop Art in the 1960s that the notion has gained public credence. That is to say, the idea that new art must be subversive became possible only after facetiousness was granted a central place in the life of art.

In order to begin to appreciate the nature of the changes that have taken place in the cultural world, one must address a number of difficult questions. What is the content of art education today? What is expected of graduate students who enter this or related fields? What benefits—in greater insight or understanding—may we look forward to from their labors? What exactly are our museums and universities asking us to support when they raise the banner of education? Complete answers to such questions would require a detailed examination of many institutions and programs. But we may discern something important about current trends by looking at a representative event.

Last month, the Whitney Museum of American Art obliged us with its fifteenth annual Whitney Symposium on American Art and Culture. Those who have bothered to follow the cultural scene in recent years know that the Whitney Museum long ago ceased to function as an institution seriously committed to the study, preservation, and exhibition of American art. Under its previous director, Tom Armstrong, the Whitney degenerated into a plaything for a certain species of socially ambitious cultural radical. There were occasional bright spots—the exhibition of work by the twentieth-century painter and watercolorist Charles Demuth that Barbara Haskell mounted in 1987, for example—but such events were as rare as oases in the Sahara.

The appointment of David Ross in 1991 as the new director of the Whitney removed whatever hope remained that the museum would reclaim its place as a responsible cultural institution any time soon. Previously the director of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Mr. Ross could be counted on to raise the ideological stakes at the Whitney. And indeed, if the effect of Tom Armstrong's tenure at the museum was to transform it into a slightly laughable panderer of art-world trends, David Ross has already set about remaking it into a bastion of grim radical pieties. He has, for example, hired the Marxist critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh to

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advise him about exhibitions, publications, and programming. It is not clear whether Mr. Buchloh was involved in organizing this year's Symposium on American Art and Culture, or whether Constance Wolf, Mr. Ross's new Curator of Education, must be given sole credit for the program. In any event, a more revealing presentation can hardly have been imagined. Entitled "Femininity and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and Transgression of Boundaries in 20th-Century American Art and Culture," the symposium dramatized almost everything that is wrong with the professional discussion of art and culture today. Considered as an intellectual event, the value of the symposium was nugatory; regarded as a symptom, however, it turned out to be priceless.

More than one hundred New Yorkers sacrificed a splendidly lucid spring day—one of those rare balmy days before the smog and humidity take over for the summer—in order to crowd into a dimly lit theater at the Whitney. The event was announced with the utmost seriousness. "Designed to introduce original research by advanced graduate students beginning their careers in American art and cultural studies," a press release told us, "the Whitney Symposium is noted for its receptiveness to new theoretical approaches as well as traditional art-historical methods." As it happens, there was not much in the way of "traditional art-historical methods" on view. But the spectacle of what advanced graduate students from some our best universities are thinking and writing about today made the symposium noteworthy, at least as a cautionary tale.

In her introduction, Constance Wolf proudly explained that the six papers chosen by the Whitney's jury this year were selected from a group of sixty: an impressive number of submissions indicating that the topic of the year—"gender"—was a subject of "great importance" whose time had come. Miss Wolf spoke as if "gender" (that is, sexual politics) was a dazzlingly new idea for such a symposium; in fact, the category of "gender"—along with race, class, and ethnicity—has long since become an academic cliché, echoing through the arts and humanities like a mantra.

But Miss Wolf's enthusiasm for the subject of "gender" did illustrate a rhetorical gambit that has been much favored in the academy and the art world recently. The basic procedure is to choose an item or two from a handful of approved radical clichés and then to present them as daring new ideas. It is not clear whether a talent for this sort of thing is a result of training or temperament, but Miss Wolf is clearly pretty good at it. In addition to announcing the topic of "gender" as if it were a new discovery, she explained that the Whitney Symposium aspired to present material that adopted an "interdisciplinary" approach, that went "beyond a traditional art-historical framework." This, too, was supposed be news, even though there is hardly an academic humanities program anywhere in the country these days that does not champion "interdisciplinary" studies and the breakdown of traditional disciplinary boundaries. No matter: Miss Wolf looked forward to the day's presentations to provide us with a "new understanding of our visual culture."

The morning's first contribution to a new understanding of our visual culture was "Mothers and Anti-Mothers, or How to Ride the Backlash Without Wiping Out," by Susan R. Kandel, a Ph.D. candidate in fine arts at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was a classic performance. Beginning with a slide depicting the actress Demi Moore nude and seven months pregnant on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, Miss Kandel launched into a long disquisition on the political implications of motherhood and abortion. Along the way, she treated the audience to slides exemplifying "pregnancy porn"—that is, pornographic photographs of pregnant women—works of art centered around the theme of abortion, and an installation piece entitled "Menstruation Extraction Kit." Miss Kandel also had frequent occasion to allude to "the current political

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climate," which she judged to be dangerously reactionary, as well as to "male paranoia," "so-called high art," and other tidbits from the current feminist lexicon.

Miss Kandel's main argument seemed to be that abortion provides a powerful "metaphorical construct" for feminists wishing to liberate women from the politically imposed tyranny of motherhood. Part of her point was that women should get beyond the nasty patriarchal notion that motherhood is a woman's biological destiny. As she put it near the end of her paper, she is adamantly opposed to any view that "would have all women meet their destiny in a delivery room." Hence the prominence of abortion, for it "suggests that giving birth is not the only thing that women do on their backs with their legs spread."

But Miss Kandel did not want to do away with motherhood *tout court*; she wanted to rethink it in a way that was suitably liberated. This turned out to be difficult. The photograph of Demi Moore, she told us, glamorous even in pregnancy, might suggest that "sexuality and motherhood are not mutually exclusive." (Has it actually come to the point where people think they are?) Throughout, Miss Kandel revealed a flawless ear for lit-crit jargon. This, as nearly as I could get it down, is how she proceeded:

> To regard the maternal body as a site of feminist intervention is indeed tempting. For Julia Kristeva this body is transgressive and thus potentially liberating, in that it hypostasizes the split self. It is the field upon which motherhood's impossible syllogism is played out, the notion that the self and the other are coexistent, codependent, and coterminous. From this syllogism Kristeva spins a romantic tale of maternal *jouissance*, but the union she celebrates is not relative to the unity of the phallus. It speaks of nonidentity, assumes fragmentation, and augurs loss. In this the pregnant body resists the masculine fantasy of wholeness and thus becomes—this thing in the state of becoming—an oppositional figure.

In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell observed that "in certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning." But even he could not have foreseen the barbarities that go under the name of criticism in the academy today. Miss Kandel is clearly already proficient at the genre, and I'd hazard tenure in five years, tops, if she (so to speak) keeps it up.

Miss Kandel is not easily seduced by the charms of motherhood, even when they are so attractively repackaged by the Bulgarian-born French feminist Julia Kristeva. The idea of a woman resisting "the masculine fantasy of wholeness" is, *ex hypothesi*, a good thing, of course, as is the image of the pregnant woman as a kind of metaphysical guerrilla, "an oppositional figure," etc. Being against "the whole Enlightenment concept of the unified self," as she put it during the question-and-answer period, Miss Kandel naturally favors anything that is "transgressive" or "augurs loss." But given the "politically regressive moment," she said, we must be suspicious of this version of feminism. What she meant was that, given the current campaign against abortion on demand, we must regard any affirmation of motherhood with great wariness. In this context, she concluded, "the oppositional nature of the woman with child reveals itself as a bloated theoretical conceit," i.e., not certifiably progressive.

This doctoral candidate in the fine arts then went on to quote the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, according to whom the "great obsession" of "the right-wing male" is the idea of the pregnant woman. "Pregnancy," according to Dworkin, "is the triumph of the phallus over the death-dealing vagina. Pregnancy is confirmation that the woman has been f____. Her belly is his phallic triumph and one does not abort his victory." Noting that she does not share Miss Dworkin's "misogynistic" interpretation of the pregnant body, Miss Kandel nevertheless lamented "the new traditionalism where the family reigns triumphant and abortion is besieged from all

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sides." She looked forward to a view of female sexuality that "traces an autoerotic circle, celebrating self-sufficiency, self-determination, and self-preservation," a repellent prospect that used to be called narcissism. Miss Kandel devoted considerable attention to *Post-partum Document*, an early (1970s) example of "politicized, feminist art" by Mary Kelly. Later published in book form, *Post-partum Document* is a kind of scrapbook that includes various trinkets and effluvia that Kelly saved from her son's early years: baby teeth, baby shoes, soiled diapers, and other charming objects.

Miss Kandel harbors considerable admiration for Mary Kelly's work. True, *Post-partum Document* suffers from concentrating exclusively on motherhood: that is, it "occludes the heterogeneous array of sites and discourses which construct the subject, absorbing these back into a coherent and explicitly biological unity." It nonetheless performs two laudable functions. First, it confronts "the patriarchal ideology that insists upon motherhood as a natural and instinctual process"—the less a feminist has to do with the natural and instinctual, the happier she is—and, second, it seeks to "redress a lack within Freudian and Lacanian theory by outlining the possibility of a female fetishism."

Perhaps you never thought of female fetishism as a desirable thing; perhaps you even believe that the more lacunae there are within Freudian and Lacanian theory the better. But for Miss Kandel, such prospects are pure ambrosia, for they suggest yet one more way in which traditional differences between the sexes can be undermined. Nevertheless, Mary Kelly made one big mistake: she bore a son, not a daughter. For this means that her identity, even when emancipated from the father, is constituted "through specific moments in *his* [i.e., her son's] masculine development. Herein," Miss Kandel said, "lies the rub." Alas! Mary Kelly was trying to be a good feminist, but by devoting her piece to a male child "she affirms the Freudian notion that a woman's greatest fulfillment lies in giving birth to a son." Miss Kandel then showed us a slide of Mary Kelly sitting on the floor with her son sitting between her legs, "his body becoming *quite literally* her phallus, her identity sealed in and through her male child." Miss Kandel did not supply the italics when she spoke, but she certainly deserves them.

It would be pleasant to report that Susan Kandel's paean to abortion represented the grotesque nadir of the day's presentation of "original research by advanced graduate students." But unfortunately the other contributions, different as they were in style and subject, betrayed deep affinities with Miss Kandel's paper. In every case, the announced subject was merely an occasion to preach politics: feminist politics, racial politics, homosexual politics. Not one dealt with works of art as aesthetic objects; all indulged heavily in opaque "theoretical" jargon. The next presentation, for example, was "Reconsidering the Stain: On the Inscription of the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Paintings." The author was Lisa Saltzman, a doctoral candidate in fine arts at Harvard University. Miss Saltzman's paper blended two themes that are enjoying great popularity in the academy at the moment. First, the reinterpretation of Abstract Expressionism as a political movement, an idea that the writer Serge Guilbaut pioneered with his contention that Abstract Expressionism was a tool of Cold War politics; and, second, an obsession with bodily evacuation as a key to the meaning of recent art. "Urinating, ejaculating, bleeding, sneezing," Miss Saltzman rhapsodized, "the body, male and female, is inscribed in the drips, spills, stains, and sprays that coat the majority of the canvases of the New York School."

As anyone acquainted with current fashions in criticism will have guessed, the "stain" that Miss Saltzman wishes to decode in Helen Frankenthaler's paintings refers not to the delicate stains that she achieved with paint poured onto unprimed canvas but to blood, especially menstrual blood. For Miss Saltzman, Frankenthaler's paintings provide a "visual analogue" of "blood-

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ied wedding-night sheets." "As constructed and coded within patriarchal society," she told us, "the stain is decidedly feminine. It is menstrual. It flows. It represents something out of control. It is something to be feared."

Not surprisingly, Miss Saltzman's real subject was the way Helen Frankenthaler's famous stain paintings were underrated by an art establishment bent on preserving patriarchy. She was especially outraged that critics should have used words like "softness," "feminine," and "sensuous" in describing her paintings when the paintings of Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, which were deeply influenced by Frankenthaler's "soak-stain" technique, were often described in different, more "masculine" terms. Never mind that Noland's signature paintings feature shapes that are distinctly hard-edged, or that Morris's work is very different from Frankenthaler's in its formal vocabulary: contemporary critics committed the unpardonable sin of treating Helen Frankenthaler as a woman painter.

Miss Saltzman's presentation was a farrago of historical half-truths and crude ideological phantasmagoria. Yet what was most noteworthy was how poorly she did by her subject. In part, Miss Saltzman's aim was to rescue Frankenthaler from the depredations of patriarchal criticism and restore her to her rightful place as a pre-eminent member of the New York School. But if taken seriously, her lucubrations could only diminish Frankenthaler, transforming an important and original artist into a proto-feminist puppet with questionable habits of personal hygiene. By enlisting Frankenthaler's painting in a political campaign, she denies its achievement as art. The effect is far more patronizing than anything even the most sexist of male critics could have contrived.

The papers that followed seem to have been composed on—and perhaps by—the same word processor that furnished us with the Misses Kandel and Saltzman's efforts. Cathy Greenblatt, a doctoral candidate in the history of consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, wondered whether there were any plausible female counterparts to Jack the Ripper, who, she informed us, was a figure that "generated and organized specific anxieties about sexual difference and feminism" at a moment when "the difference between men and women was being radically rethought in medicine, psychology, and sociology." The image of the female killer, she said, "gives shape to the anxiety that feminism may be exacting its political price in the realm of femininity."

Most of Miss Greenblatt's talk was devoted to a discussion of two examples of the "monstrous feminine": a Texas housewife who was sentenced to jail for plotting to have a neighbor's daughter murdered in order to make room for her own daughter as a high-school cheerleader, and a lesbian prostitute in Florida who was recently condemned to death for murdering at least five of her male clients. Far from being repelled by these women, Miss Greenblatt finds that they "articulate limits of femininity, and respectively its excesses and depletions in a late-twentieth-century rhetoric of gendered anxiety, a rhetoric that figures contradictory fears, pleasures, and desires of a culture fraught by questions of sexual identity." Thus what irritated her were not the murderous actions of these women, but the unfair way that they were treated by the media.

That concluded the morning's session. One poor fellow from the audience had the nerve to ask whether some of the assertions put forward that morning did not betray "almost a wild attitude." For example, he asked, what about the contention that a little boy sitting between his mother's legs is "quite literally" a phallus? But such doubts were not to be countenanced. Constance Wolf abruptly silenced him with the admonition that "one has to have an open mind" and the assurance that "interpretation is inherently subjective."

The afternoon's presentations reminded us of just how subjective interpretation could be. In "Kinky Escapades, Bedroom Techniques, Unbridled Passion, and Secret Sex Codes," Matias Viegener, a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at the Uni-

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versity of California, Los Angeles, introduced the audience to the fetching world of "underground gay punk fanzines," which were said to offer "signposts for a new map through alternative gay identities, recolonizing areas such as punk, drag, hard core, camp, and S&M." In what was perhaps the most insightful comment of the day, Mr. Viegener observed in passing that "in a way punk is about not thinking, an attack against rationalism and its bourgeois valorization, which explains its appeal to intellectuals and graduate students." For his part, Christopher A. Davis, a doctoral candidate in cinema studies at New York University, ran several clips from silent comedies of the 1920s. The main point of his paper, "The Semiotic Solution: The Construction of Masculinity in Silent Comedy," seemed to be that these films provided a more plastic, and hence more amenable, notion of what could count as sexual identity than the rigid world we have inherited from the 1950s. The presentations concluded with an examination by Carla Willard, a doctoral candidate in comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania, of the halftones that were published to accompany the first appearance of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. Here we discovered, among much else, that Washington "suppressed his own masculinity" in a cunning effort to overturn the dominant image of blacks in white America.

Any hopes one might have harbored that graduate students could be counted on to outgrow such antics vanished when the jurors responded to the papers. One of the jurors who selected the papers presented that day was Jonathan Weinberg, assistant professor of art history at Yale University. He began a comment by noting that he was "horrified" to admit he was a juror now that "juries have been so discredited" by the Rodney King verdict. And another juror, Anna Chave, visiting associate professor of art history at Hunter College, expressed her dismay that abortionists should be paid only "a pittance" for their work while obstetricians receive "hugely lucrative" fees for theirs. Professor Chave then took a moment to denigrate Helen Frankenthaler as "the art-world starlet who [once] hitched her wagon to the brightest and biggest male stars" and who more recently "endorses Rolex watches and espouses good quality and good taste on the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*." About one of Miss Greenblatt's murderesses, she noted that the woman in question was "calling men to account as a gender for their many crimes against her, repaying them in a way she knew she couldn't legally justify, but for which she may have felt a moral license. For that matter," Professor Chave continued, "any woman who has been subject to a sexual crime of any magnitude—which is to say most of us—will have an inkling of what that license looks like." She ended with a few kind words about Anita Hill and a nasty phrase or two about our "already gynophobic Supreme Court."

Professor Weinberg began his official response by congratulating the Whitney for welcoming "difference" and for providing a center for "ideas and art." Fifteen years ago, he noted correctly, papers such as those we heard at the Whitney would not have been taken seriously by any respectable university.

What progress we have made! Today, the very concept of art may be rejected for the sake of spurious "ideas" cobbled together from ill-digested bits of academic esoterica. Yale, Harvard, Penn, the University of California: the products of these and other elite institutions were all on parade that day at the Whitney, sharing their "research" with a large and respectful audience. One recalls that Juvenal satirized a time when people were content to distract themselves from serious matters with "bread and circuses." Today's academic intellectuals seem to prefer a blend of sexual posturing and cultural politics. It is a form of betrayal. In the end, though, one's response to such antics is as much pity as anger: pity for the graduate students and professors who have willfully exiled themselves from the riches of art and literature, anger that they should have leave to deprive their students of those riches.

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Rebecca West & the tragedy of Yugoslavia

by Richard Tillinghast

"Hey, Croat!" shouts Rebecca West's driver Dragutin to a young Yugoslav soldier posted in Serbia, in an exchange that is bound to strike the reader as prophetic: "'You're a brave fellow. How do you like us Serbs?' 'Very well, very well!' he answered smiling. 'Everybody is kind to me here, and I had thought you were my enemies.' '*Eyah!*' said Dragutin, twisting the lobe of the boy's ear, 'We'll kill you all some day.' The boy wriggled and laughed . . ."

The ironies resonate forward to 1992, when what has been called Yugoslavia (Land of the Southern Slavs) for just over sixty years is dismembering itself in a civil war in which both sides have blood on their hands, and backward as far as the thirteenth century, when Dragutin was a minor Serbian monarch struggling to define his kingdom against the claims of (to name only the most prominent of the political powers of that era) Byzantium to the east, Hungary to the north, and Venice and the Holy Roman Empire to the west. A good way to develop a nose for the quarrels, the murky claims and counter-claims that surround the present-day bloodletting in the Balkans, is to turn to Rebecca West's twelve-hundred-page masterpiece of travel writing, local color, and narrative history, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

Anyone who reads widely will eventually hear about this legendary book, which upon its publication in 1941 was hailed by the English and American press as "one of the great travel books of this century," "one of the great books of our time," "a major book in every sense." It runs the length of the first two volumes of Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, another masterpiece more often mentioned than read.

For a book which speaks so forcefully to the carnage in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and which spoke so decisively against the fascist cancer in Central Europe in the 1930s, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* may at the same time be considered a timeless sort of book—as well as a book one should have infinite time to read. The ideal setting for reading it would be—but perhaps I am prejudiced, since I am describing how I first came to read the book twenty-five summers ago—a *pension* on Lake Ochrid in Yugoslavian Macedonia, with a view across the lake to the mountains of Albania. From the center of Ochrid, with its Turkish-style wooden houses, their upper "harem" stories overhanging the narrow streets, one could walk uphill to look at the medieval Serbo-Byzantine frescoes in Saint Clement and Sveta Sophia and the many other orthodox churches, or stop for grilled peppers and *slivovitz* in a café where Muslims in fezzes sat reading the Istanbul papers.

"The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" already begins to sound as quaint an appellation as "The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes," as the country was called between 1919 and 1928. The more lasting presences in the Balkans are the Otto-

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man Empire—"Turkey in Europe" as Sir Charles Eliot's classic book called it—since the region was controlled by the Turks for four hundred years preceding the Balkan Wars of 1911-13 and World War I, when the European powers finally gave "the sick man of Europe" the *coup de grâce*; and the medieval Balkan kingdoms where, when the Byzantine usurper John Cantacuzenus came to visit, "the Serbian nobles and their ladies rode out to meet him, themselves handsome in red cloaks lined with fur and embroidered in gold, and their horses as handsome with silver trappings, often brought from Venice."

The author of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* remained supremely unintimidated by the sweep of history she set herself to master. As the premier literary journalist of her day—and the most handsomely paid—Rebecca West was a famously quick study; and though she may have romanticized and even misinterpreted her Yugoslavian material, she proceeded with a sure hand. For her, history emphatically *mattered*: this is one reason her book has so many important lessons for us today, ghettoized in the present tense as our culture is. Narrating the life of the Serbian emperor Stephen Dushan, who she thinks might have been able to take over Byzantium and save it from destruction by the Turks, she writes: "But Stephen Dushan died. . . . Because of his death many disagreeable things happened. For example, we sat in Prishtina, our elbows on a tablecloth stained brown and puce, with chicken drumsticks on our plates meagre as sparrow-bones, and there came towards us a man and a woman; and the woman was carrying on her back the better part of a plough. Here, where women had worn diadems of gold and silver, and the Empress had spoken her fine mind before the respect of the Diet."

Who was Rebecca (from 1959, Dame Rebecca) West? An excellent biography is available: Victoria Glendinning's *Rebecca West: A Life*, published in 1987. She was born Cicely Isabel Fairfield in 1892, the third and last daughter of a Scots mother and an Anglo-Irish father who had met and married in Australia. Her father Charles—the very image of the vainglorious Anglo-Irish "squireen" from the pages of Somerville and Ross—was a figure of legend to his daughter. His photograph shows the erect carriage, good tailoring, undomesticated moustache, and arrogant cheekbones of a hard-riding young officer. Family lore held that Charles's father was the natural son of a royal personage, and received a discreet allowance from the Hanoverian purse. The milieu of Cicely's County Kerry forebears was that of the lower landholding gentry—which makes her, spiritually, a country cousin of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, whose family memoir *Bowen's Court* describes life in the country around Tralee, where Charles Fairfield was born in a "pinched Georgian" house. (The contemporary descendants of this class animate the novels and stories of William Trevor.)

Because the family had no means of support in Ireland, the Fairfield brothers were brought as children to London, where they eventually found places for themselves within the British Empire's civil service bureaucracy and army. One became a clerk in the Colonial Office, another a minor civil servant in the Board of Trade, another served in the Royal Artillery. Charles Fairfield himself became a lieutenant in the Prince Consort's Own Rifle Brigade, sold his commission in 1867, and went as an adventurer to America and Australia, enjoying a brief career as a journalist in Melbourne. Returning to London with his wife, Isabella, a Scotswoman to whom he was chronically unfaithful, Fairfield was never able to support his family properly, speculated in mining shares, and finally left to seek his dubious fortune, dying penniless when Cicely was fourteen, in a rented room in Liverpool, having pawned even his watch, collar studs, and cufflinks. "If he had been found dead in a hedgerow," as Rebecca West put it, "he could not have been more picked bare of possessions."

"I had a glorious father, I had no father at all," West was later to write. What Charles

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Fairfield, whom Glendinning calls "a shabby Prospero," thought of his formidable youngest daughter is not on record. A childhood anecdote has her burying chestnuts in the family garden in Streatham, then digging them up again. "I am God," she explained to her father, "and they are people, and I made them die, and now I am resurrecting them." Why had she buried them, if she was only going to dig them up again, her father wondered, puffing on his pipe. Why not just leave them alive? Her reply: "Well, that would have been all right for them, but it wouldn't have been any fun for me." Certainly the image of this distant, unreliable, improbably glamorous man haunted Cicely Fairfield, feeding her love of kings and her thirst for "a world where men are still men and women still women," as she was to characterize Yugoslavia. Emancipated woman and free-thinker though she most certainly was, one is compelled to agree with the reviewer who claimed that "Rebecca West is a Socialist by habit of mind and a conservative by cell structure."

After Fairfield's death, the girls' mother took them to Edinburgh and there raised them bravely, with the support of her family, just on the edge of respectability in the rundown streets and squares of that city. Cicely became a suffragist, a socialist, and an actress. When she was in her twenties, the family eventually moved back to London, into a house in the Hampstead Garden suburb, a breeding ground for the radical social ideas that were seeping in beneath the bland assurance of the Edwardian age. One impressive feature of Victoria Glendinning's sketch of West's early life is that its portrait of British life in the early years of the twentieth century reveals so much social turmoil, so much coming and going from one part of the Empire to another—from London to Edinburgh, from English-dominated Ireland out to America and Australia and back. One usually sees these years in sepia-tone; but in fact this was an era of ferment for Great Britain—and I stress Britain rather than England because the woman who was to become Rebecca West brought to her life and her life's work the blood and the background of Scotland, Ireland, and the entire outspread English-speaking world.

Cicely Fairfield became Rebecca West when she was about thirty, taking her name from Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, where the heroine is a strong-minded character who forces her married lover into a melodramatic double suicide by drowning. The desperation suggested by her namesake may say something about the peril associated with being a feminist in the early years of the century. The name also caused some readers of West's early writings in the feminist weekly *The Freewoman* to assume that Rebecca West was Jewish, and in Victoria Glendinning's words, "She was in fact, both by temperament and circumstances, an honorary Jew." In the literary and political London where Rebecca West got her start, Jewish intellectuals were an influential voice in favor of modernism and social change, and against traditional English insularity.

West became a Fabian socialist, associated with George Bernard Shaw, met H. G. Wells and became his mistress. In their affair, "Panther" was his pet name for her, "Jaguar" hers for him. Her involvement with Wells was the fateful event of her life. She bore his son Anthony, who was to become a lifelong thorn in her side—first because his need for a motherly presence (for years he was told that Rebecca was his "Aunty Panther") challenged her feminist ideas and her need to be free; and later because as an adult and an author in his own right, Anthony West, in books like *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, pictured his mother as a hypocrite and worse. But Wells provided the young Rebecca West with a useful rival: his grandiose ambitions in a book like *An Outline of History* may well have suggested to West that she could approach the study of history on just as broad a scale and be even better at it than her mentor was. The names Jaguar and Panther suggest just the sort of powerful, predatory qualities of both these writers. West's literary journalism was characterized throughout her career by "strong attack"; even in her eighties, the literary edi-

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tor of the *Sunday Telegraph* praised the "unmistakable pounce" of her reviewing style.

By 1936, over ten years after the end of her involvement with H. G. Wells, after a series of affairs with such men as Lord Beaverbrook, and by now married to Henry Andrews, a banker, Rebecca West visited Yugoslavia for the first time. Infatuated with the country and its people, she went twice again with her husband. It was from these visits that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* grew. By her persuasiveness as a narrative historian, by the charm of her style, she opens to readers the history of the Balkans—of the Ottoman Empire, of the medieval Serbian kingdoms, of the Byzantine Empire—about which even those of us who have managed to receive a good education in this country are not well informed, because our picture of Europe is generally limited to Western Europe, and our knowledge of the ancient world focused on classical Greece and Rome. And no doubt a similar unfamiliarity formed part of the allure of the Balkans for Rebecca West, who gives a sometimes tiresome impression of having personally discovered "the Slav" —the opposite of everything she dislikes about the British. The book is full of formulations like the following: "the Slav, who seems wholly a man of action, is aware of the interior life, of the springs of action, as only the intellectuals of other races are." West might be described as entertaining a kind of benevolent racialism—an attitude that very well fits her material since Yugoslavia is, or was, a country whose identity was defined by the interplay of its different provinces, or nations.

Witnessing now the loathing that the South Slavic ethnic groups seem to feel toward each other, why was Rebecca West such a strong supporter of a Serbian-dominated united Yugoslavia? There is plenty of evidence in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* that West was aware of the divisions and enmities between the Serbs and their neighbors; yet she comes across as a resolute backer of the federation of South Slavs. Perhaps part of the reason she felt at home with the notion of a "united kingdom" was that she herself was a citizen of such a state. With an Anglo-Irish father, a Scottish mother, she herself was, for lack of a better term, British. She was in addition a great admirer of the United States. She lived in an age that saw the amalgamated megastate as the optimum political arrangement. And the Balkan states, having recently emerged from Ottoman and Austrian domination, were under threat by Italy to the west and Germany to the north. As West's friend and guide whom she calls Constantine puts it: "a state of Serbs, Slovenes, and Croats, controlled by a central government in Belgrade, is a necessity if these peoples are to maintain themselves against Italian and Central European pressure on the west, and Bulgarian pressure, which might become in effect Central European pressure, on the east."

Most of Europe now seems content with the idea of reversing centralization and allowing the region to "re-balkanize." West, though she would be horrified by the savagery of today's Yugoslavia, would still probably sympathize with the Serbs' sense that they have a right to dominate Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Macedonia. West often reminds us of the debt we owe the Serbs for having saved Europe from the Turks. If she regrets anything in the formation of Yugoslavia, it is the attempt to reconcile the medieval, Slavic, Orthodox strain represented by the Serbs with the Austrian-influenced Roman Catholic culture of the Croats and Slovenes—"two elements, which were as different as the panther and the lynx." Since West's totemic animal, if you will, was the panther, it is not hard to see where her sympathies lay. "It was a shameful thing that Serbia, with its glorious history of revolt against the Turks, should cease to be an entity . . ."

Over the crazy quilt of tribes and nations which was Yugoslavia is superimposed the shifting mantle of empire—because over and over again the region has been fought over, claimed, and counterclaimed by different conquerors. Early in the book the author remarks to her husband, "I hate the corpses

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of empires, they stink as nothing else," and adds that "the Herzegovinians had found that one empire is very like another, that Austria was no better than Turkey." Here West's sanguine view of the Byzantine Empire, not shared by many modern historians, mirrors the traditional, romanticized version: "We are aware that the Eastern continuance of the Roman Empire was a supremely beautiful civilization."

While I agree with her that the Byzantines "produced an art that is unique in its nobility, that in its architecture and painting and mosaics and metal-work and textiles found a calligraphy for the expression of man's graver experiences which makes all other arts seem a little naive or gross," it is not true that "the Byzantines were able to live in dignity and decency for four centuries in the knowledge that they were doomed, that one day they would be destroyed root and branch by the merciless Turks." This is cartoonish in its oversimplification and even in its Manichaeanism. Given the sluttishness of the Byzantine ruling classes, their penchant for assassination, castration, blinding of enemies, they were anything but decent and dignified. The corruption of their administration, the rapaciousness of their taxation, made the peasantry in many areas gladly accept the newly arrived Turks, who in the early centuries of their rule were the ones that the words "dignity" and "decency" more accurately portray. The absolutism of the Ottomans was an absolutism borrowed from the supplanted Byzantines. West's emphasis, though, is not political but aesthetic, as when she traces the survival of Byzantine culture in this Macedonian peasant woman's needlework: "When she took up her needle it instinctively pricked the linen in Byzantine designs, and she had the Byzantine idea that one must decorate, always decorate, richly decorate."

Had Rebecca West lived in an age of theological heresies, she would have been a Manichaean—she admits to seeing history as a conflict between light and darkness. If she consistently haloes the Byzantines and the Slavs in goodness, the Turks in her version, consistent with the centuries-old European view which has almost achieved the status of myth, represent the nightmare side of the equation: "The Turks ruined the Balkans, with a ruin so great that it has not yet been repaired and may prove irreparable." Two points to be made here are that in her account of the Turks, West reflects the attitude of the Slavs, and that in the grand scheme of her book, the Turk is sometimes the same as the German, whose mouthpiece in these pages is Gerda, the wife of West's Serbian guide, the poet Constantine, a Jew whose loyalties are Slavic. "Think," says Gerda, viewing the graves of French and German soldiers who died in Serbia during the Great War, "think of all these people dying for a lot of Slavs." West comments: "This is the conqueror's point of view. It was the Turks' point of view in all their aggressive periods. Everybody who is not Gerda is to Gerda 'a dog of an infidel,' to be treated without mercy."

West's picture of the Germans at the moment when the Nazis were consolidating their power is more persuasive than her generalizations about the Turks, which clearly owe almost everything to information given her by her Serbian guides. It may be true to attribute to the Slavs an "infinite capacity for inquiry and speculation," but then to contrast them to "the Turks, who had no word in their language to express the idea of being interested in anything," is to traffic in ignorance. Anyone with even a basic knowledge of Turkish will often have used the verb *ilgilenmek*, "to be interested in," the adjective *ilginç*, "interesting," and a dozen other related words. At the same time West has a wonderful eye for such things as the style which she calls "Turkish Regency" (the apotheosis of which is represented in Istanbul by the Laleli, or "tulip," Mosque). No one else could, or would, write: "The vaulting under the galleries was painted with roses, which proved that there must be a Turkish expression meaning 'too divine.' It was like being inside a building made of a lot of enormous tea-trays put together, the very most whimsical tea-trays that the gift depart-

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ment of Messrs. Fortnum & Mason would wish to provide." But to go on to comment, "In this erection a fierce people had met to worship their militant prophet," is again to reveal an appalling ignorance of Islam, which does not claim divinity for its prophet. At moments like this, one is inclined to agree with West, though not in the way she had in mind, when she adds, "I understand nothing, nothing at all."

Yet Rebecca West's affinity with all that makes life delightful allowed her to respond spontaneously to the Turkish genius for architecture and design, to see in the ruins of a Turkish villa in Bosnia "that all the proportions were wise, that it must have been light without flimsiness, and firm without heaviness, and that in the heat the coolness must have been stored here as in a reservoir." What a pleasure it is to see her prose mime the lines of the building she is describing. It is for phrases like this that we return to the pages of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Though in sympathy with her Serbian hosts Rebecca West may have chosen to regard the conquering Turk as a figure out of a nightmare, still she can enter into the inner fantasy of the Turk at his leisure: "Along this river there must have once wandered, if there is any truth in Oriental miniatures, a young prince wearing an ospreyed fez and embroidered garments, very good-looking now though later he would be too fat, carrying a falcon on his wrist and smugly composing a poem about the misery of his love." To get a truer sense of "Turkey in Europe," one might more profitably turn to Nobel Laureate Ivo Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina*, his *Bosnian Chronicles*, and his book of linked short stories *The Pasha's Concubine*, all of which chronicle life in a Bosnian town from the early years of the Turkish occupation to the First World War—telling the story from a Slavic perspective, but in a more nuanced and informed manner.

Rebecca West, as I have suggested, never allowed herself to be overawed by her material. On the contrary, she seized control of it with the same gusto with which she must have entertained guests at her famous parties. (In her late seventies she might celebrate her birthday by giving, first, a luncheon party at an expensive London restaurant and, later, a dinner party at her flat.) After a sentence like "It is not easy to visualize family life as it was lived in the palace at Belgrade during this period" (1900), she can then go on to render the scene in a way that suggests she is quite at home in a palace. The authority with which she narrates the bloody and bizarre assassination of King Alexander and Queen Draga in 1903 is enhanced by her ability to evoke the décor of the period. Describing the movements of the conspirators: "The palace was a fine example of the school of interior decoration to which the dynasties of Europe seem irresistibly drawn, and they had to find their way among objects including many bead *portières*, a huge black bear that someone had shot during the Bulgarian War, marble fountains removed from old Turkish palaces . . ."

The story of the Balkans is to some degree the story of murder ("Yugoslavia is always telling me about one death or another," she says), and West tells the story like the novelist she was. Here, in her most polished-brass and mahogany style, are King Alexander and Queen Draga shortly before being assassinated: "All that is known is that at the last they stood in their bedroom, the flabby spectacled young man and the stout and bloated middle-aged woman, fantastically dressed, and faced a group of officers whose shaking hands held guttering candles and drawn swords and revolvers." One might speculate that the Anglo-Irish Fairfield family's romance with lineage is vicariously played out in West's one-off thumbnail sketches of distressed royalty: Princess Euphemia, "the widow of a Serbian prince killed by the Turks," who sewed her grief and her faith into work like "a panel of velvet, once crimson, now maroon, which was embroidered in silver-gilt thread with words, many words, a prayer, a poem."

Though the hieratic in West could re-

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spond to the Balkans' Byzantine legacy and though her sybaritic nature could accommodate some note of delight in the soul of the Turkish conqueror, West could find no fellow-feeling for the Hapsburgs, the Balkans' most recent scourge at the moment the book was written. One of the great set-pieces in a book that resembles in places a great picture-gallery filled with famous set-pieces is her account of the assassination in 1914 of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Archduchess Sophie. Franz Ferdinand's enormous callousness and egotism are emblemized by his passion for shooting: "At a Czech castle in one day's sport he bagged two thousand one hundred and fifty pieces of small game. Not long before his death he expressed satisfaction because he had killed his three thousandth stag."

West being the great reporter that she was, her account of the conspirators and of the events leading up to the assassination is expertly crafted, but not so dominated by facts as to exclude a surrealistic touch. Standing in the room where a reception had been held for Franz Ferdinand, "One can conceive the space of this room stuffed all the way up to the crimson and gold vaults and stalactites with the furred and feathered ghosts, set close, because there were so many of them: stags with the air between their antlers stuffed with woodcock, quail, pheasant, partridge, capercailzie, and the like; boars standing bristling flank to flank, the breadth under their broad bellies packed with layer upon layer of hares and rabbits."

The point of this nightmarish catalogue (aside from sending one scurrying to the dictionary to look up "capercailzie") is that, unlike the Byzantines, whose imperious dominance of the Balkans arrogated to itself a right to political mastery that was inseparable from the autocratic ideals of the Orthodox Church—and unlike the Turks, who alongside their brutality had a refined sense of pleasure—the Austro-Hungarians in West's view were stupid, lacking in style, bigoted, and life-denying. She sees the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie less as a crime than as a symptom of the morbidity of the empire: "Nobody worked to ensure the murder on either side so hard as the people who were murdered." Rebecca West was a more informed student of the Austro-Hungarian than she was of either the Byzantine or the Ottoman empires, and her analysis of its putrefaction matches that of the empire's great novelist, Joseph Roth, whose masterpiece, *The Radetzky March*, chronicles both the social pathology and the human tragedy of its declining days. Like Roth, West feels compassion for individual human beings, even those of the ruling classes, who were tainted by association with a social system which affected every aspect of their lives: "They could not be blamed for morbidity in a society which adored death, which found joy in contemplating the death of beasts, the death of souls in a rigid social system, the death of peoples under an oppressive empire."

West, who was psychoanalyzed in the 1920s, was a Freudian to the extent that her natively aristocratic nature could allow it, and this book consistently champions Eros in its battle against Thanatos: "The soul should choose life," she asserts. But this credo is not programmatic or unqualified, because "when the Bosnians chose life, and murdered Franz Ferdinand" in the action that touched off the Great War, "they chose death for the French and Germans and English . . ." Further, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is not essentially a book about politics, but rather about how life should ideally be lived, and this lies at the heart of Rebecca West's love affair with the Slavs: "To be among them was like seeing an orchard laden with apples or a field of ripe wheat, endowed with a human will and using it in accordance with its own richness." Another way of describing West's achievement is to say that she gives her readers a comparative critique of civilizations. "There is no town I know where an open door more invariably discloses a sensuous and crafty garden; and the cats—I apply here a serious test of civilisation—are plump and unapprehensive."

The book is filled with delights like this, and one's experience of it owes much to the

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sense of pleasure West is able to convey through her prose style, which embodies the very opposite of what she defines as "prose in its defective sense, in its limitation to factual statement, in its lack of evocation and illumination." To read West is to encounter the tradition of English prose at its kinetic and sensuous best: she breathes life into a sentence in the way that Dr. Johnson perfected, with its roots reaching back to Sir Thomas Browne, Shakespeare, and Cicero —and she is philosophically grounded in English empiricism. On every page one finds simple sentences that evoke a wholesome sense of materiality: "We lingered before some little shops, tiny caves of flimsy woodwork, with their minute stocks, that amounted to perhaps a hundred jugs, or twenty rolls of cloth, or a few basins of yoghurt and rice porridge." At times the writing elevates itself into poetry: "as it was May the purple and white lilacs were as thick along the streets as people watching for a procession, and the chestnut trees were holding their candles to the windows of the upper rooms."

One way West employs her classic English prose is in making frequent comparisons between the ideal represented for her by the Slavs and the effeteness of British life in the *entre-deux-guerres* period: "The congregation had realized what people in the West usually do not know: that the state of mind suitable for conducting the practical affairs of daily life is not suitable for discovering the ultimate meaning of life." Of Bitolj, which had been the capital of a Turkish administrative district in Macedonia, praised two paragraphs above for its gardens and its "plump and unapprehensive" cats, West adds, "It is one of those cities which prove to our amazement that we Westerners have never even begun to understand what town-planning means. Thirty-five thousand people live in it, yet from every point of the compass it looks like a garden . . ."

What would today be called "quality of life" issues, however, were far from being the essence of why Rebecca West thought we needed to pay attention to Yugoslavia. The South Slavs, in particular the Serbs, had placed Western Europe eternally in their debt by having saved European civilization from the onslaught of the Turks, who would in West's view have destroyed it as surely as the Nazis were threatening to destroy it in the Thirties. Western Europe's successful repulsion of the siege of Vienna in 1683 by the Turkish pasha Kara Mustafa represented the beginning of the Ottomans' slow decline, but the Balkans had been the battlefield where this conflict had played itself out since the first Turkish incursions in the fourteenth century and would continue to be a theater of conquest and occupation until after World War II.

Medieval Serbia's great catastrophe occurred on the Plain of Kossovo, where Turkish armies fought to a draw the combined forces of the Serbs and Bosnians—a disaster which was to precipitate four hundred years of Turkish rule, and which entered into national folklore as a tragedy with parallels to the Crucifixion. John V. A. Fine in his history *The Late Medieval Balkans* reports that "Kossovo epics are documented as being sung in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We may assume that they date back to near the time of the battle." Rebecca West records hearing in 1937 the ballad beginning

> Poletio soko titsa siva,
> Od svetinye, od Yerusalima,
> I on nosi titsu lastavitsu . . .
>
> [There flies a gray bird, a falcon,
> From Jerusalem the holy,
> and in his beak he bears a swallow . . .]

I myself heard it sung at the Macedonian Poetry Festival in Ochrid in 1967. The gray falcon turns out to be not an ordinary bird but "Saint Elijah," with a message for the Serbian leader Tsar Lazar. He must choose, says the gray falcon, between an earthly kingdom, in which case he would defeat the Turks—or a heavenly kingdom, in which case he would build a church on the Plain of

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Kossovo and celebrate the Eucharist—after which the Turks would attack and the Serbs would be overwhelmed.

The facts of the battle seem to be the following: The Turks attacked; though there was dissension within the Serbian ranks, they fought well, as did their allies, and the battle ended in a bloody draw—the armies of both sides being decimated. Afterward the Serbs and Bosnians withdrew; so, soon after, did the Turkish army. Thus the battle was not a defeat for either the attackers or the defenders. But since the Serbs had limited manpower and the Turks had many troops in Anatolia to draw on, the Serbs had become so weakened that they could not resist future Turkish raids, and in that sense Kossovo *was* the defeat that eventually handed Serbia over to Ottoman domination. The Serbs, though, in mythologizing their defeat, made the battle itself the focal point where a choice was made between resistance and surrender, and Tsar Lazar became the emblem of Christ, who had admonished his followers, "Resist not evil."

The lesson West drew from the Serbs' way of accommodating their defeat by the Turks informed her attitude toward how Europe should respond to the Nazi threat (remember that this book was written in the late 1930s): "indeed this poem shows that the pacifist attitude does not depend on the horrors of warfare [the Serbs were slaughtered anyway]. It goes straight to the heart of the matter and betrays that what the pacifist really wants is to be defeated." Winston Churchill was not the only Briton who opposed appeasement! Rebecca West was perhaps better informed about the Nazis than her contemporaries: her husband, who was part Jewish and had lived in Germany as a child, had business interests that took him often to Germany and Central Europe.

One begins to appreciate fully the writer's strategy in this very complex book when one becomes aware that her intent is to call Britain to action against the Nazis—not on political grounds alone, but also on philosophical and aesthetic grounds. In West's scheme of things the Germans, like the Austro-Hungarians before them, fall into the Thanatos camp, represented in this book by "a difference between Gerda on the one hand and the Slavs and Turks and us on the other, which touched a more fundamental problem: whether pleasure has any value." The English pacifists, many of whom West must have known personally from her youthful, socialist days, err in her opinion because they "want to be right, not to do right. They feel no obligation to be part of the main tide of life," which entails both enjoying life and fighting the battles that must be fought. Like Tsar Lazar at Kossovo, "they want to receive the Eucharist, be beaten by the Turks, and then go to Heaven." Elsewhere she applies this principle to events in Nazi Germany: "That non-resistance paralyses the aggressor is a lie: otherwise the Jews of Germany would all be very well today." West even hated the clothes the pacifists wore, "which are of a sort not to be accounted for by poverty and by overwork, since they are not specially cheap and must indeed require a special effort to find."

If the gray falcon stands for non-resistance to evil, appeasement, unilateral disarmament, etc., the black lamb of her title carries things one step further. It refers to a ritual observed every year on Saint George's Eve at a place in Macedonia called the Sheep's Field. Lambs and cocks would be slaughtered on a specific rock there, in a ritual that must have been centuries old, after which barren women slept on the rock in the expectation of having their fertility enhanced. The ritual triggered in Rebecca West an epiphany of horror and nausea: "as we came nearer the rock we had to pick our way among a number of bleeding cocks' heads. The spectacle was extremely disgusting. The colour of spilt blood is not properly a colour, it is in itself discoloured, it is a visible display of putrescence. In every crevice of the red-brown rock there had been stuck wax candles, which now hung down in a limp fringe of greasy yellow tails, smeared with blood." The young gypsy West saw sacrificing a black lamb "had the features and bearing of an Indian prince, and

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a dark golden skin which was dull as if it had been powdered yet exhaled a soft light. His fine linen shirt was snow-white under his close-fitting jacket, his elegant breeches ended in soft leather boots, high to the knee, and he wore a round cap of fine fur." That the people who enacted the ritual were so elegant in appearance horrified West all the more, because clothing and cuisine jointly take pride of place in this book. She immediately twigs to the larger meaning of what is occurring:

> I knew this rock well. I had lived under the shadow of it all my life. All our Western thought is founded on this repulsive pretence that pain is the proper price of any good thing. Here it could be seen how the meaning of the Crucifixion had been hidden from us, though it was written clear. A supremely good man was born on earth, a man who was without cruelty, who could have taught mankind to live in perpetual happiness; and because we are infatuated with this idea of sacrifice, of shedding innocent blood to secure innocent advantages, we found nothing better to do with this passport to deliverance than destroy him.

The rock, representing the doctrine that violence has redemptive value, becomes a standard for evaluation of artists and works of art: "Nearly all writers dip their pens in inkwells tainted with this beastliness. Shakespeare was obsessed by it." Among English writers of the Thirties, perhaps one could make a distinction between those on the Left who believed in the purifying power of revolutionary violence, and others like West and Orwell who had seen too much to believe that. Examples of artists who "were not with us at the rock, but with the sunlight which the stench only so faintly disturbed, which shone inviolate above the mountains," are Mozart, Jane Austen, and Blake. West, who believed unashamedly in the value of pleasure, was at least partially illuminated by that sunlight, though she never tried to convince herself that darkness does not exist: "Into this world I had been born, and I must resign myself to it; I could not move myself to a fortunate planet, where any rare tear was instantly dried by a benediction."

Contemplating Rebecca West's remarkable life, looking at a photograph of her at ninety—masterful and erect, every inch the great lady she had become—the reader of her monumental, *sui generis* book can feel nothing less than awe for this woman, who seems to have had the strength and energy of ten. Victoria Glendinning gives us an unforgettable glimpse of West shortly before her death:

> Her visitors in the last years, waiting in the drawing-room at Kingston House, might be disturbed by loud groans of 'Oh, *God*, oh *God!*' from the bedroom, as Dame Rebecca divested herself of the old dressing-gown in which she worked and strove to dress herself, crippled by arthritis, in pain from diverticulitis; 'Oh *God*, oh *God!*' again as, with her housekeeper's help, she rummaged for her hearing-aid and the right pair of spectacles. But then Dame Rebecca made her entrance, in a gold-braided kaftan, supported on a malacca cane, two or three pairs of spectacles swinging on cords round her neck, and proceeded to give the visitor the time of his life. It was hard to leave, and she would limp to the door to see her guest out—the impossible questions, the imperious opinions and the laughter still pouring from her. Only when the door closed did the power cut out and Dame Rebecca collapse into gray exhaustion.

I suspect that Rebecca West, in rejecting suffering and sacrifice as a redemptive part of life, was kicking against the misery of her own early years, including the endless difficulties presented by her unhappy love affair with H. G. Wells. For a woman so drawn to a racial, genetic explanation of life, one might even suppose that there existed in West an atavistic urge to stand up in defiance not only against the poverty and dependence of her own childhood, but even against the degradation of her father's marginalized Anglo-Irish lineage.

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In an epilogue written after World War II had broken out, when Britain was nightly braving the Blitz, she chronicled Yugoslavia's defiance of Hitler—a defiance that triggered a murderous response from Germany. These events prompted West to re-evaluate a crucial part of the Yugoslavian saga: "The poem of the Tsar Lazar and the grey falcon tells a story which celebrates the death-wish; but its hidden meaning pulses with life." In this way Eros and Thanatos are reconciled. As a result of the nation's almost suicidal bravery, "the news that Hitler had been defied by Yugoslavia travelled like sunshine over the countries which he had devoured and humiliated, promising spring." But German domination of Yugoslavia, disastrous enough on its own terms, widened the ethnic divisions that already existed, and the country descended into civil war. The two major resistance factions—led by Mihailović on the Right and Tito on the Left—fought not only the German army, but each other. And then there were the Ustasi, pro-Nazi Croatian separatists who massacred Orthodox Serbs by the thousand: a major reason some Serbs regard what is happening today not as territorial aggrandizement, but as revenge delayed for fifty years. Thus Yugoslavia may be regarded as an entity created by the First World War and destroyed by the Second. Pondering Yugoslavian history, a reader of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* may not feel at all prepared to answer the puzzle Rebecca West poses: "The world is tragic, but just how tragic?"

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The crisis in concert programming

by Samuel Lipman

Concert programming is indeed a difficult craft, always trying to accomplish something for the audience and something for the musicians. So far as the audience is concerned, the process is like sandwich-making: the tasty filling must remain in the middle, surrounded by an envelope made of wholesome, not always exciting, but always graspable material. In another way, programming is a horse trade: a combination of what the audience wants and what the musical mind making the program thinks is good for them. In still another way, programming is like *couture*: the music played must be a suitable vehicle for the performers, making them sound—and even look—more glamorous than they otherwise might. Last, and often least, concert programs have an educational purpose: they must teach by balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar, the quickly perceived with that which takes repeated hearings to make its effect.

Styles in program-making change over time. The cry in concert administration today is "thematic" programming. On a musical level, this might mean no more than a concert made up entirely of works written in variation form. Getting further away from music itself, this approach can result in the grouping of works on the basis of similarity in the ideas that might be thought to have inspired the compositions; examples might be several works inspired by revolution, or by the legend of Don Juan. On a still higher level of ambition, a multi-year series of concerts might be devoted to playing all the works of a particular composer, with Mozart and Schubert the most musically rewarding possibilities. But by far the most trendy kind of programming these days is the devoting of a concert, or, better yet, a series of concerts, to works all written in a particular time or place; in this twist to the thematic idea, the highest prize goes to programs consisting of music written in a "sexy" period—in particular the lush years just before the cataclysm of World War I.

It would be wrong to find in thematic programming an entirely new departure. Program-makers have always attempted to make their offerings cohere. If one looks at old nineteenth-century programs, this coherence was to be found in the presentation of works that all would win the audience: the first concert of the New York Philharmonic, on December 7, 1842, consisted of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony, excerpts from operas of Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, and Rossini, a quintet by the then extravagantly popular Austrian composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837), and a "New Overture" by the now forgotten but then crowd-pleasing Bohemian composer Johann Wenzel Kalliwoda (1801-1866).

As the atmosphere in which music was presented progressed from a circus to an artistic experience, programs began to reflect the musical purposes of their makers. Thus Mendelssohn presented the music of Bach in Berlin and Leipzig, Liszt presented

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the music of the future (mostly the music of Wagner and of Liszt himself, along with their disciples), and Wagner conducted programs linking his own music with that of Beethoven. By the end of the nineteenth century, the theme in programming was masterpieces; in this, America led the way in making orchestral concerts an indoctrination in the greatest works of the century, with a special concentration on Beethoven and Wagner.

But already by the end of the nineteenth century, the approach that was to animate most program-making until quite recently came into prominence. This approach was chronological, making of each concert a miniature history of the development of music, along the lines of the ontogenetic fallacy, known also by the catch phrase "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." Simply put, this discarded biological (and Darwinist!) idea meant that the development of an individual embryo recapitulates the evolutionary development of the organisms which preceded it in the evolutionary cycle. The aesthetic import of this attractive formulation was, of course, that music, as it moved from the simple to the complex, was getting better; what finer way of showing this progress could there be than by beginning each concert with early music, following with by the Viennese classics, then the early romantics, and ending with the late romantics, the contemporary composers at the end of the nineteenth century?

The remarkable Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894)—no relation to the twentieth-century virtuoso Arthur Rubinstein—put this principle of improvement into practice in the 1880s by presenting, in many great cities of Europe, a series of "historical recitals." The music on these concerts ranged from Byrd and Bull to Liszt and Tchaikovsky, with the earliest music coming at the beginning of the series, and the latest at the end; sometimes single concerts were devoted to one great composer, such as Beethoven. Similarly, in the 1909-10 season of the New York Philharmonic (then called the Philharmonic Society of New York), Gustav Mahler scheduled six concerts, over five months, in a "Historical Cycle": the first concert included Bach, Handel, Rameau, Gretry, and Haydn; the second, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven; the third, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann; the fourth, Brahms, Dvořák, Smetana, Weingartner, Wolf, and Mahler himself; the fifth, Wagner and Liszt; and the sixth, Pfitzner, Bruckner, and Richard Strauss.

It is my impression that historical programming, sometimes leavened by the practice of devoting individual concerts to a single great composer, was the model of choice for the first half of this century. By the 1940s, this reigning model could powerfully be seen in operation in San Francisco, in the sophisticated hands of Pierre Monteux. A typical program—save on special occasions such as a performance of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony or a great choral work of Bach—seemed to begin with Mozart or Haydn, move on to a Beethoven or Brahms symphony (or concerto), then some French music, and, finally, a contemporary or even new work; when the contemporary work seemed difficult, the French work ended the program, with the new work coming just before. The same was true in solo recitals: every piano recital seemed to begin with Bach or Scarlatti and end with either a bravura late-romantic work or a twentieth-century work by Prokofiev. Violin recitals would begin with Tartini, Corelli, or Bach, move on to Beethoven and Brahms, and end—at least with adventurous violinists—with Debussy, Szymanowski, Bartók, or Prokofiev. In vocal recitals, the pattern was similar: the recitals of even the greatest singers would begin with what were once so nicely called *Arie Antiche*—seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century classical songs of perhaps Monteverdi, Carissimi, Alessandro Scarlatti, and Bononcini. Then would come some early *Lieder* by Mozart or Beethoven, then several real *Lieder* of Schubert, Schumann, or even Wolf, then operatic excerpts (sung with piano accompaniment) and a choice selection of popular items.

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I would not want to give the impression that these mini-historical programs were an invariant rule. By the 1920s, pianists Artur Schnabel and Edwin Fischer were concentrating on Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms; a decade earlier, in Mahler's last, sadly uncompleted, season (1910-11) with the Philharmonic, and one year after he did his historical series in New York along with the Beethoven cycle, he scheduled a cycle of five "National Programmes," each concert, respectively, containing the music of English-American, Italian, Norse-Slavic, German, and living composers.[1] But despite the many exceptions, the principle remained: programs went from early to late, from old to new, from yesterday through today, perhaps even to tomorrow.

By now it is surely no secret that the principle of historical programming depended for its existence and continuation on an unbroken sequence of musical composition, attractive to both musicians and cultivated audiences, extending from a distant past through a welcoming present to a foreseeable future. But this fact no longer obtained after World War I; new composition met an increasingly resistant reaction, and by World War II it was rejected wherever it was presented. And so historical programming became artificially attenuated, cut off at whatever point in the recent past artists and the public found convenient. In piano literature, acceptable new music seems to have ended with the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Sonatas of Prokofiev, written between 1939 and 1944, or perhaps with Béla Bartók's Third Piano Concerto (1945). In opera, the last widely recognized new work appears to have been Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), or perhaps the same composer's *Billy Budd* (1951). In orchestral music, the line seems to have been drawn rather later, with the Fifteenth Symphony of Shostakovich (1971). As we all know, new pieces have continued to be written—and played—in great profusion, but here the problem has been to place them on the program after the beginning and before the end, so that audiences will neither come late nor leave early.

Matters are made worse—at least so far as historical programming is concerned—by the carving-up of the music of the past, under the influence of the authentic-performance movement, into distinct specialties. Bach no longer belongs to pianists or to symphony orchestras, but to harpsichordists (and organists) and baroque ensembles. Mozart, Schubert, and even Beethoven are now increasingly reserved for the fortepiano and other "original instruments," and for orchestras of reduced size. As a result, pianists and conductors, those two natural leaders of the concert stage, are now relegated to playing romantic blockbusters.

It is to fill the gap left by the desuetude of historical programming that thematic programming, in a new and more rigorous guise, has now come. This phenomenon has recently been discussed by the *New York Times*'s Bernard Holland in a review of the first of three concerts at Carnegie Hall by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Simon Rattle. The entire series was packaged as "The Revolution of Expression: 1911, 1912, 1913"; it consisted of music by Debussy, Delius, Elgar, Nielsen, Prokofiev, Ravel, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky. For Holland, the series was more

1 In light of the present notion that interest in American music (such as it may be) is entirely a product of the herculean work of its paid advocates in the 1970s and 1980s, it is interesting to note that the printed copy of the English-American program, scheduled to include works by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924), Edward Elgar (1857-1934), Charles Loeffler (1861-1935), Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), and Henry Hadley (1871-1937), bore at the bottom the following statement, added in red ink: "In response to a general request it has been decided to offer George W. Chadwick's [1854-1931] Overture 'Melpomene' as the opening number of this programme." As an example of the way programming schemes often come up against the requirements of reality, the "Living Composers Programme" turned out to include works by such eminently dead writers as Weber (1786-1826) and Schubert (1797-1828).

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than merely three concerts; it was

> the selling of music through context, the thought that new listeners for a sometimes daunting art are won by placing music in its own time, surrounded by contemporary art, literature, politics, and life style. . . . Concerts are preceded and followed by lectures, recitals, and exhibitions around the city. Museums and universities (the Metropolitan and Columbia among them) are involved; a city's school children are special targets.

Mr. Holland went on to mention such attempts at thematic programming in New York as the Museum of Modern Art's "Vienna 1900," in which the showing of the Viennese painters of the day was coordinated, in association with the 92nd Street Y, with the highly successful performance of the music of Schoenberg and Zemlinsky. Mr. Holland then made very clear just what was so necessary about these attempts:

> The New York Philharmonic's new administration is busy planning thematic enterprises too, and it is fairly evident that Lincoln Center's powers that be are not happy with its booking-operation status and are thinking hard along similar lines. They are wise to do so. With little music education in the schools, future audiences are at risk. The current opinion of many music professionals says these listeners will be attracted not by catering to popular or ethnic tastes but by presenting music as-is with the world that produced it resonating in the background.

I will pass over Mr. Holland's initial use of the word "selling"; one would have thought that "communication" would have had a rather more authentic ring, and one perhaps better suited to the story he had to tell. But what some will say are mere semantics aside, it is clear that underlying this curious combination of academicization and marketing is a profound loss of faith in music's power to persuade on its own terms. Indeed, the *Times* review was hardly a rave for the conductor and the orchestra; the same was true of Edward Rothstein's *Times* review of the concluding Birmingham concert and Peter Davis's *New York* review of the entire series. All the critics loved the idea of the enterprise, admired the music, but found the performances to have come up short.

At present, thematic programming in its true sense still seems only to involve smaller musical enterprises. The latest New York institution to have been bitten by the thematic bug is the American Symphony, a free-lance cooperative orchestra that has existed for many years on a hand-to-mouth basis, mostly limited to giving several concerts each season in Carnegie Hall. But next season the orchestra will be under the musical direction of Bard College President Leon Botstein, an aspiring conductor and Viennese cultural historian as well as a college administrator; one may expect from him rigorously formulated schemes to combine music with his own multi-faceted life and present it all to the musical public in the guise of concerts.

Whatever the future may hold by way of the fleshing out of Lincoln Center's interest in thematic programming, there is also a kind of false thematic programming going on today, with its fervent advocates to be found among our large orchestras. Here, as in the New York Philharmonic announcement of its forthcoming, 150th-anniversary season, every concert, or series of concerts, is given a moniker, often one only partially descriptive of the program in question. Thus, the Philharmonic season leads off with a program containing the "Unfinished" Symphony of Schubert, a Symphony by Etienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817), and the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven; this combination of the overfamiliar Schubert and Beethoven with the unknown Méhul is headlined "Masur Begins with Beethoven." Erich Leinsdorf's conducting of the *Preciosa* Overture of Weber, the Britten Nocturne, and the Strauss *Ein Heldenleben* is headlined "A Hero's Life." A program in which Leinsdorf conducts the important Hindemith *Symphonic Metamorphoses*, the Haydn "Military"

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Symphony, and a concert version of the Tchaikovsky *Swan Lake* Ballet is headlined "Leinsdorf Conducts Swan Lake." Then there is the James DePriest program of the Samuel Barber Essay no. 2, the Victor Herbert Cello Concerto no. 2, and the Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique* showcased under the headline of—surprise!—"Symphonie fantastique." But perhaps the best testimony to the new Philharmonic management's marketing expertise is the series "Casual Saturdays," in which ticket buyers are entreated to "wear a pair of slacks and your favorite sweater, and enjoy these hour-long matinee concerts," one of which features Leonard Slatkin conducting the Mendelssohn Overture *The Hebrides* and the Gershwin *An American in Paris* under the headline—again, surprise!—"An American in Paris."

We must be careful to distinguish between the true and the false kinds of thematic programming. The true attempt takes its impetus from the very real problem that all but the most celebrated performers and most glamorous musical institutions today have in finding either an audience or extensive coverage in the musical press. It is my impression that less celebrated performers and less glamorous institutions have just about given up hope of finding an audience large enough to support them financially. All that is left to these less favored guests at the musical banquet is to make a stir in the press, for, in the absence of audiences, only major press coverage can make a convincing argument to patrons and private and public institutional funders that their clients should continue. It is widely realized that it is next to impossible to get this coverage from critics who are increasingly bored with the music they know well, and increasingly unwilling to give their sympathy to performers who lack an international cachet. Only a shifting of the burden of attention away from the specific qualities of the performances and the music to the pedagogic worth of the larger ideas being communicated through the performances of the music can summon our current generation of critics to attention. Let me repeat: in almost all cases, the aim of true thematic programming is to get press, not an audience. So far, it has succeeded in doing just that. Whether this halcyon condition can continue for long is very much to be doubted; even music critics, after all, can get tired of ideas.

Then there is what I have called false thematic programming, the notion that putatively dull music can be brightened up by perky advertising gambits. With this sloganeering, we have come to the real crisis in musical programming: the fear, amounting to a conviction, among the most successful and powerful musical artists, administrators, and entrepreneurs, that there is now no young audience for classical music capable of supporting the business on the scale to which it has become accustomed. And so there now are the Deutsche Grammophon "All-Star Cards" described in last month's *New Criterion*, and there is the huckstering being provided by the New York Philharmonic not just in celebration of its anniversary season but on behalf of its excellent and very serious new music director.

Different in expression as the true and false kinds of thematic programming are, what unites them is a loss of confidence in music itself, in music as it has traditionally existed. In the recent past—over, say, the last two hundred years—music has been perceived as the beautiful embodiment of the great values of Western civilization. Some of these values were religious, and some were secular; some were concerned only with the existence of order and structure within the music itself. Regardless of just how wonderfully entertaining great music was thought to be, listening to it was a serious pursuit, worthy of the employment of our highest faculties; regardless of how educational great music was thought to be, it was considered worthwhile in and of itself. Now even the greatest music must fight for its very life at the court of *demos*. The present crisis in programming is just one sign of how difficult the fight really is, and just how poorly armed music's contemporary defenders are to defend the art.

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William Dean Howells & the practice of criticism

by James W. Tuttleton

It seems only yesterday that Lionel Trilling reported that he had created a sensation—in the cafeterias at Columbia University—by assigning to his students the work of William Dean Howells. What could Professor Trilling have conceivably found of interest—his students wanted to know—in this Victorian purveyor of old-fashioned realism in American fiction? Howells seemed too commonplace to be admitted to the company of Lawrence, Joyce, Proust, Mann, Kafka, and the other masters of modernist fiction.

The question was a pertinent one, which Trilling brilliantly answered in "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste" (1951). Anyone who takes the trouble to look up that essay—in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*—will find a remarkable description of Howells's concern with the quotidian and a defense of his central subject, the actualities of middle-class family life. Howells is important, Trilling argued, precisely because he concerned himself with the question of the heroic in relation to the ordinary problems of existence—like searching for a place to live, as Basil March does, at length, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), or struggling with the problem of how to rear one's children, as Silas and Persis do in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Trilling observed that we do not find such life experience dealt with in the modernists because "the prototypical act of the modern intellectual is his abstracting himself from the life of the family." And nowhere is this indifference to, or rejection of, the family, as a theme, more evident than in modernist fiction. However, Trilling called it an act of presumption to think that such matters are beneath the dignity of the artist and critic. Even for the intellectual, "it is a fact of spirit that it must exist in a world which requires it to engage in so dispiriting an occupation as hunting for a house." Howells, more so than any of the avant-garde, appreciated these stubborn facts of the quotidian, and, in the process of dramatizing them, he disclosed an important reality for us today—the extent to which such facts require us to moderate our radical sentiments and our passion for alienation.

Trilling's essay was a lively and provocative work of criticism, but I have the impression that he convinced few enough of his students and virtually none of our intellectuals. It was Trilling's attention to writers like Howells and his concern with the moderation of the will that led Joseph Frank, in "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination" (1956), to accuse Trilling of confusing "even the most casual bourgeois convention" with "the most sacrosanct conditions of life itself" and to "endow social passivity and quietism as such with the halo of aesthetic transcendence."

I believe that it is still commonly felt by our critics and writers that any sympathetic attention, in the literary art, to a realist portrayal of ordinary middle-class family problems is really trivial, and perhaps even a

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pandering to the political status quo. True literary excitement—we often hear—derives from more radical critiques of society or portraits of individuals at the point of some passionate extreme—as reflected, for instance, in adultery, incest, and murder; in nihilism, radicalism, and terrorism; or in drug-induced hallucinations, paranoid conspiracies, and intellectual crimes and punishments—all of those aberrations, in short, of the ordinary life. Since the rise of modernist and anti-realist fiction in our century, and of its champions, Howells has been the symbol of everything about the Genteel Tradition to be rejected.

Howells's contemporaries hardly thought him a spokesman for conservative gentility, and he was no stranger to controversy in his own time. His call for a more realistic portrait of the conditions of American life brought him under the censure of a wide range of nineteenth-century British and American critics and writers who believed that fiction ought to present not what was or is but what should be. For such critics, fiction should present an idealization of life, a model for our emulation—and the model they had in mind ought distinctly to be English. Howells's dismissal of the romantic distortions of life in the domestic sentimental writers of his time was matched by a shocking devaluation of some of the most popular English favorites in America: "The art of fiction," he wrote in 1882,

> has, in fact, become a finer art in our day than it was with Dickens and Thackeray. We could not suffer the confidential attitude of the latter now, nor the mannerism of the former, any more than we could endure the prolixity of Richardson or the coarseness of Fielding. These great men are of the past—they and their methods and interests; even Trollope and Reade are not of the present. The new school derives from Hawthorne and George Eliot rather than any others; but it studies human nature much more in its wonted aspects, and finds its ethical and dramatic examples in the operation of lighter but not really less vital motives. The moving accident is not its trade; and it prefers to avoid all manner of dire catastrophes. It is largely influenced by French fiction in form; but it is the realism of Daudet rather than the realism of Zola that prevails with it, and it has a soul of its own which is above the business of recording the rather brutish pursuit of a woman by a man, which seems the chief end of the French novelist. This school, which is so largely of the future as well as of the present, finds its chief exemplar in Mr. James; it is he who is shaping and directing American fiction, at least.

Imagine writing off the English masters in favor of the French (even the less pornographic French), or calling Henry James—who had just insulted the national character (in *The American*) and American girlhood (in *Daisy Miller*)—"a very great literary genius" whose style "is, upon the whole, better than that of any other novelist I know." The American anglophiles were outraged, as were the British.

The firestorm Howells touched off was instantaneous, bitter, and prolonged. Exponents of the Genteel Tradition, like Hamilton Wright Mabie, spurned the new school of Realism and clamored for idealization in art. "Realism," Mabie said of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, "is crowding the world of fiction with commonplace people; people whom one would positively avoid coming in contact with in real life; people without native sweetness or strength, without acquired culture or accomplishment, without that touch of the ideal which makes the commonplace significant and worthy of study." Another group, exponents of the Romance genre, proclaimed, like Robert Louis Stevenson in "A Humble Remonstrance," that, since all art is ruthlessly selective, no fiction can ever be truly realistic: "The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, . . . but by its immeasurable difference from life." Yet the defenders of Realism were quick on the counterattack, claiming that the "scientific detachment" and "clinical observation" of masters like

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Howells and James had killed once and for all sentimental distortion in fiction and the idealism of the Romance mode. So embittered was this controversy—which signaled a paradigmatic shift in the history of fiction and criticism in this country—that Edwin H. Cady and David L. Frazier were able to put together, in 1962, a sizable book of reactions called *The War of the Critics over William Dean Howells.*

Howells's comment about the lubricity of many French novels also points to another ground for the attack against him. If the Genteel Tradition thought that Realism was too graphic, if not photographic, some younger writers, who had benefited from the greater openness achieved through Howells's efforts, later attacked him as *insufficiently* realistic, especially in dealing with sex. Frank Norris—in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction"—spoke for many young Naturalists, who were influenced by Zola, in condemning the Realist "drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner." The younger Naturalists claimed a freedom to explore what Norris flamboyantly called "the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man." Mencken, in "The Dean," mocked the prudish Howells as an "Agnes Repplier in pantaloons," and Sinclair Lewis, in "The American Fear of Literature," lampooned him as "one of the gentlest, sweetest and most honest of men" who "had the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight is to have tea at the vicarage."

The young can be especially cruel—and are often quite wrong. As Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau has shown in *The Circle of Eros: Sexuality in the Work of William Dean Howells* (1983), Howells's novels were in fact "considered risqué by his contemporaries," especially as he moved "from filigree indirection to bold erotic allegory." Though Howells will seem tame to readers brought up on Updike, Burroughs, and Mailer, Miss Prioleau is quite right in observing that "Howells was a powerful and effective erotic writer," with "a preternaturally sharp eye for sensual details," who

> used every conceivable literary device to portray the sexual drama: dialogue, allusion, symbolism, choreography, euphemism, and the entire "novel of manners" repertoire. He focused so tightly and lingeringly on phallic and coital images, infused his love scenes with such palpable tension, and built his erotic climaxes with such finesse, that no sexual overreading is really ever necessary.

Anyone with any doubt of this matter should look again at Howells's *A Modern Instance* (1882), from which Freud could have learned a thing or two about the Electra complex and the forms of its symbolic expression.

We come back, then, to Howells's reputation as a spokesman for genteel values, for an old-fashioned realism, and for themes and topics that have seemingly lost their importance for intellectuals. To justify any new attention to Howells, to explain this once controversial writer and his significance for today, we need first to reacquaint ourselves with certain details of his life and work.

Born in 1837 in Martin's Ferry, Ohio, Howells grew up in what was then the Western Reserve. As a boy he worked on the family's newspapers in Ashtabula and Columbus, setting type, and later reporting, writing, and reviewing. It was in the West that he absorbed the democratic sympathies that mark every one of his novels. Howells never had the benefit of a college education, since the family business needed him too much, and like many writers of that time —Twain, Crane, and Dreiser, for example—the composing room was his Harvard. His youthful literary ambitions included writing plays, for which he had little talent, and poems, for which he had even less. It was in criticism and fiction that Howells was eventually to make his mark.

A literary tour of the East in 1860 brought him introductions to Emerson, Hawthorne,

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Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell (editor of *The Atlantic*), and the publisher James T. Fields. Boston was then the literary capital of the nation, and these Brahmins recognized in the boy literary ambition, personal charm, and utter earnestness, if not yet the signs of greatness. Perhaps not altogether seriously, they gave this young Westerner reason to believe that, if he applied himself, he too could become one of their exalted number. After he left Boston for Columbus, young Howells had the audacity to write to James T. Fields: "I look forward to living there some day—being possibly the linchpin in the hub."

A campaign biography of Lincoln, who ran for president in 1860, won Howells a government post in the consulate in Venice, where he spent the Civil War years. This Italian period was improved by extensive study of ancient and modern languages and literatures, and of European life and culture. He read widely, wrote criticism, and composed his first travel book, the charming *Venetian Life* (1866). His essays "Recent Italian Comedy" and "Modern Italian Literature," for *The North American Review*, were well received, and Lowell electrified Howells by remarking, "You have enough in you to do honor to our literature. Keep on cultivating yourself." Yet the spectacle of aristocratic politics in Europe dismayed Howells and the moral quality of its life appalled. He left Italy because, he said, he was finding himself "almost expatriated, and I have seen enough of uncountryed Americans in Europe to disgust me with voluntary exile, and its effects upon character." Yet in Italy Howells discovered the brilliant realist comedies of the eighteenth-century playwright Carlo Goldoni, whose work reoriented Howells toward fiction, a fiction based on what he called the "critical observance of books and men in their actuality."

Back in the United States, between 1866 and 1870, Howells was employed as assistant editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*, where his hard work, erudition, charm, and congeniality made him a favorite of Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Agassiz, and the others. Between 1871 and 1881 he was the chief editor of *The Atlantic*—the linchpin in the hub indeed; and in that most influential post he reshaped the direction of American fiction by launching an all-out attack on the domestic sentimental writers (today being revived by feminists) and by publishing the new regionalists and realists—Henry James, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, John Hay, Sarah Orne Jewett, John W. DeForest, Mary Noailles Murfree, and others.

At the same time, he launched his own career as a novelist and attained popular esteem with *Their Wedding Journey* (1872), *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873), *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879), *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), *Doctor Breen's Practice* (1881), *A Modern Instance*, *A Woman's Reason* (1883), and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Henry James thought he stood a fair chance of becoming "the American Balzac." "That's a great mission," he told Howells; "go in for it!" By 1885 Howells was widely regarded as perhaps the most distinguished literary figure in America. In later years he was to be called "The Dean of American Letters" and to consolidate his reputation with other novels of comparable quality and interest—so many of them, in fact, that only a few may be listed here: *Indian Summer* (1886), *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897), *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), *The Leatherwood God* (1916), and *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* (1920). Between 1886 and 1892, moreover, he conducted a column, the "Editor's Study," at *Harper's Monthly*, in which he called the public's attention to important new books and enunciated the new principles of Realism. Thereafter, his criticism was regularly featured in *Harper's Weekly* (1895-1897), *Literature* (1898-1899), *The North American Review* (1900-1912), and other magazines. Some of his periodical essays dealing with the art of fiction were gathered in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), which became the rallying point for those who saw themselves enrolled under the ban-

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ner of Realism—writers like James, Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Mary Wilkins Freeman, E. W. Howe, and H. H. Boyeson.

The movement of American Literary Realism, which dominated critical discussion after the Civil War, was an amalgam of many elements and personalities. "No one invented realism," Howells told Thomas Sergeant Perry in 1886; "it came." But of these confluences, Howells and his perspectives were most important. This is now more clearly evident with the publication of a new three-volume collection, *W. D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, in the Indiana University Howells Edition.[1] To read these 167 reviews and critical essays is to discover how catholic and wide-ranging were Howells's literary interests and how perceptive and generous were his sympathies. I have the impression that these represent only about 25 percent of the total number of his essays and reviews, from which one may infer that he read nearly everything by everybody. Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Rossetti, Browning, Dickens, Thackeray, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Zola, James, Wilkins, Hardy, Dunbar, Ibsen—all are here reviewed, often more than once; and it is remarkable to witness his unfolding grasp of a writer—like a James or a Dickens—over the nearly sixty years of his commentary on the literary life of his time. He had a perceptive eye, a quick grasp of a writer's essence, and a remarkable ability to change his mind as writers deepened in importance over time or as the defect of his initial response became apparent to him.

"Criticism," he remarks in *My Literary Passions* (1895), "ever since I filled myself so full of it in my boyhood, I have not cared for, and often I have found it repulsive." It was, he thought, the "idlest" thing in the world; it was "absolutely useless to art of any sort"; and he told Thomas Bailey Aldrich in 1901 that "I hate criticism. . . . I never did a piece of it that satisfied me." Even so, at other times, he saw reviewing as a "stern and responsible duty: the exercise of discernment between the good and the bad, the false and the true, the sincere and the sham." He saw the public as gaining from an accurate description of the form and content of the work under review. And he saw it as the reviewer's task to try to correct the taste of the age. The Realism that Howells espoused evolved, over a considerable period of time, out of his editorial work with young writers and his extensive reading and reviewing of the established. The editors of the first volume conveniently summarize Howells's general principles:

> He advocated modest honesty and clear and truthful adherence to reality, fidelity to the authentic, the experienced, the observed instead of romanticistic abstraction, sentimentality, and pretense. His criticism was built on respect for the common as the naturally human *par excellence*. In adhering to principles and techniques of narration which serve these ends, it valued the prevalence of character revelation over plot invention, "dramatic" presentation over authorial intrusion and didacticism, and organic over superimposed structure.

Howells's principles suggest a reaction against the prevailing Romanticism that colored earlier nineteenth-century fiction. Art was for him, as for Aristotle, a mimetic representation of phenomenal reality, a speaking picture of character in relation to the external conditions of life. The test of art was thus its verisimilitude, its realism, its capacity to mirror existence with fidelity, and to reflect it with a balance that is representative of its range and variety. The test of the novel for him, as he remarks in *Criticism and Fiction*, is this: "Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that

1 *W. D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism*, David J. Nordloh, general editor. *Volume I: 1859-1885*, 352 pages; *Volume II: 1886-1897*, 384 pages; *Volume III: 1898-1920*, 288 pages. Indiana University Press, $39.95 each; three-volume set, $100. This edition represents the colloboration of several literary and textual critics—Ulrich Halfmann, Christoph K. Lohmann, Don L. Cook, David Kleinman, Ronald Gottesman, and Donald Pizer.

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shape the life of actual men and women?" His several reviews and essays dealing with his two close friends, Mark Twain and Henry James (how different they were!), invariably stress their fidelity to the observed facts of human experience. In his 1887 piece on "The Truthfulness of Mark Twain's Fiction," the brilliance of *Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* inspire this exhortation:

> Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and we believe that even its masterpieces will find a response in all readers.

Pre-eminently Howells stood for the art that conceals art, for impersonal narration, and for the presentation of character by dramatic and indirect means. In this Ivan Turgenev was his model. "Tourguenief's method," Howells observes, "is as far as art can go. That is to say, his fiction is to the last degree dramatic. The persons are sparely described, and briefly accounted for, and then they are left to transact their affair, whatever it is, with the least possible comment or explanation from the author." He said that when he "remembered the deliberate and impertinent moralizing of Thackeray, the clumsy exegesis of George Eliot, the knowing nods and winks of Charles Reade, the stage-carpentering and lime-lighting of Dickens, even the fine and important analysis of Hawthorne, it was with a youthful astonishment that I realized the great art of Tourguenief."

However much Howells's criticism is founded on an aesthetic of Realism, *mimesis* was never an end in itself. The moral function of literature, to teach as well as to please, was also an important criterion in his criticism. Art instructs by means of delight. The pleasure of a realistic portrait is the aesthetic bait that hooks the reader, even as the novelist is simultaneously "teaching" him about the character and condition of the world, of human nature, and our manifold experience. Howells told Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "I should be ashamed and sorry if my novels did not unmistakably teach a lenient, generous, and liberal life: that is, I should feel degraded merely to amuse people." And he criticized Ralph Keeler's *Vagabond Adventures* in saying "a book has no business to be merely literature; and such a book as this especially ought to teach something,—ought to disenchant youth with adventure, and show Poverty in her true colors." Even so, Howells's point of view does not endorse overt didacticism in literature, as his comment on George Eliot suggests. The instruction of any good novel, in teaching us how to live, derives from its fidelity to life itself. In *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), he remarked of realist fiction that "truth to life is suffered to do its unsermonized office for conduct."

He faced a more serious problem, however, with how conduct might be corrupted by fiction. American novels that romanticized seduction and illicit love nearly always drew his ire, not because the illicit is absent from life but because the audience for fiction, in America in his time, consisted largely of young unmarried girls, for whom representations of immoral sexuality, as in *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, could be personally disorienting.

> If the novel were written for men and for married women alone, as in continental Europe, it might be altogether different. But the simple fact is that it is not written for them alone among us, and it is a question of writing, under cover of our universal acceptance, things for young girls to read which you would be put out-of-doors for saying to them, or of frankly giving notice of your intention, and so

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> cutting yourself off from the pleasure—and it is a very high and sweet one—of appealing to these vivid, responsive intelligences, which are none the less brilliant and admirable because they are innocent.

If he valued the moral purity of his young readers, he acceded to the conditions under which he was obliged to work; in any case, no American magazine editor would have printed a Flaubertian story of seduction and adultery. Howells thus drew a line beyond which his Realism would not go. There could not be, he said, any "palpitating divans" in his novels. The restrictions imposed on him by Mrs. Grundy—which no European writer had to suffer—irritated Howells at times, as it did James. Even so, both writers were circumspect and reserved by temperament. They have been condemned for this—by those who deny the moral function of art (or who have a lower standard of morals)—as sissies or pious old maids.

In his reviews and essays, Howells is quite explicit about how adventure stories and other romances may corrupt the reader: "Romantic novels hurt," he tells us, "because they are not true—not because they are malevolent, but because they are idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behooves us to know and to understand, that we may deal justly with ourselves and one another." Justice is a recurrent theme in his criticism, especially with respect to social and class relations. As a Western democrat from Ohio and an outsider with the Boston elite, he was hypersensitive to the arrogance and snobbishness of the privileged class, which nevertheless was charmed by him.

Realism in his hands was meant to affirm the native dignity of every person, no matter how socially despised—hence his celebration of Twain and others who made the Huck Finns and Hank Morgans their protagonists. The romanticization of lords and ladies, the "aristocratic spirit," he thought, was passing away in fiction. "Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this. It wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there; it does not care to paint the marvellous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify the actual for the vulgar few." Thomas Sergeant Perry was right in remarking in 1882 that

> there is truly a national spirit in the way Mr. Howells shows . . . the emptiness of convention and the dignity of native worth. . . . After all, what can realism produce but the downfall of conventionality. Just as the scientific spirit digs the ground from beneath superstition, so does its fellow-worker, realism, tend to prick the bubble of abstract types. Realism is the tool of the democratic spirit, and Mr. Howells's realism is untiring. It is, too, increasingly good-natured. We feel that Mr. Howells is scrutinizing the person he is writing about with undisturbed calmness, and that no name and no person can impose upon him by its conventional value.

So confident was Howells, in the 1870s and early 1880s, of the triumph of economic progress and political equalitarianism that he saw everywhere in America a genial present and a sublime future. His essay on Dostoevsky in 1886 expresses this "good nature" in remarking that a novel like *Crime and Punishment*

> is to be praised only in its place, and its message is to be received with allowances by readers exterior to the social and political circumstances in which it was conceived. It used to be one of the disadvantages of the practice of romance in America, which Hawthorne more or less whimsically lamented, that there were so few shadows and inequalities in our broad level of prosperity; and it is one of the reflections suggested by Dostoievsky's book that whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing—as false and as mistaken in its way as dealing in American fiction with certain nudities which the Latin peoples seem to find edifying. Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have [like Dostoevsky]

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> been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth; . . . and in a land where journeymen carpenters and plumbers strike for four dollars a day the sum of hunger and cold is certainly very small, and the wrong from class to class is almost inappreciable. We invite our novelists, therefore, to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and to seek the universal in the individual rather than in the social interests. It is worth while, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities. . . .

There is a great deal of truth is this remarkable statement. America *did* offer greater opportunities for freedom and advancement than any other nation in the world—hence the massive immigration seen in those years. Yet the comment has always been held against Howells as evidence that he had no sense of social evil, that he had sold out and was toadying to the Gilded Age "Establishment."

The paradox in this remark about the "smiling aspects of life" is that it does not really represent what he then, in fact, really thought. He had just recently suffered a nervous breakdown in which, he said, "the bottom dropped out." Such breakdowns always have many causes, but an important factor in Howells's was his witnessing the growing disparity between America's rich and poor. Massive immigration, unemployment, laissez-faire economics, and violence between capital and labor had begun to horrify him.

The Haymarket Riot in Chicago in 1886 was a turning point in Howells's life. On that occasion, a bomb was thrown at a labor rally; many were injured and some policemen were killed or wounded. A group of workingmen were arrested for throwing the bomb, although the evidence connecting them to it seemed tenuous. When the Supreme Court confirmed the verdict of guilty, Howells wrote many private and open letters and essays condemning the forthcoming "civic murder" of these laborers, and urging clemency. In doing so, he ran counter to the Establishment and risked his position as an arbiter of American life and letters. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *The Minister's Charge* (1887), *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and *The World of Chance* (1893)—all reflect Howells's darkening mood. To save his soul he embraced a personal creed of Christian Socialism compounded of the writings of Laurence Gronlund, the English Fabians, William Morris, and others; he commended it to his readers.

Central to this phase of his literary criticism was the example of Tolstoy, the great novelist and Russian aristocrat who had rejected his worldly fame and accomplishments in order to become peasant-like, striving to serve the lowliest of the low, in the manner of Christ. Tolstoy's "What to Do?", "My Confession," and "My Religion" transformed Howells's life and taught him, he wrote, "to hope that the world may yet be made over in the image of Him who died for it, when all Caesar's things shall be finally rendered unto Caesar. . . . He taught me to see life . . . as a field for endeavor towards the happiness of the whole human family; and I can never lose this vision, however I close my eyes, and strive to see my own interest as the highest good." This transformation was stupefying to many of the Boston literati; Howells had caught a case of the "Russian measles," many of them thought, and as for the Haymarket rioters, Whittier said, the "ruffians were well hanged."

A Hazard of New Fortunes has its moments as a realist portrait of those economic inequalities in the 1880s. But when ideology overtakes a writer, mere verisimilitude is rarely felt to be adequate to converting people to socialism. Howells's later novels became more and more talky and didactic, overtly religious and socialistic. Finally, in *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), he abandoned Realism altogether for the utopian fantasy of socialist brotherhood—where private property and money do not exist, where the good of others in Altruria is central, all have the means of subsistence, and perfect equality is the basis of life. All of this sounds

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very Edenic, but Howells—despite opening up *The Atlantic* to many essayists on free silver, taxation, specie payment, and other such topics—knew next to nothing about how capital is formed or wealth is created. In these romances, he fails to describe how America might get from the Gilded Age to Altruria—without bloody conflict over the confiscation of private property. But his humanitarian sympathy always endeared him to the Left and may account, in part, for why Trilling thought him pertinent to the "roots of modern taste."

The socialist romances were rather a blip in Howells's lifelong commitment to Realism, which he resumed after the turn of the century. Even so, as he advanced in years, such esteem as he enjoyed with the American public was that of an elder statesman and congenial man of letters whom the modern world seemed largely to have passed by. Howells continued to write contemporary reviews—on Arnold Bennett, Robert Herrick, Charles Chesnutt, the later James, and Hamlin Garland—as the third volume of his selected criticism attests. But much of his late criticism is memorial in character, dealing with writers that he had loved or at least long known—Twain, Zola, Tolstoy, Eliot, and Poe. It is nonetheless acute for being quite naturally retrospective.

On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday party, Henry James sent him from London a magnificent tribute, "A Letter to Mr. Howells," in which he praised Howells's fiction and put on record his sense of

> that unfailing, testifying truth in you which will keep you from ever being neglected. The critical intelligence—if any such fitful and discredited light may still be conceived as within our sphere—has not at all begun to render you its tribute. . . . You may remember perhaps, and I like to recall, how the great and admirable Taine, in one of the fine excursions of his French curiosity, greeted you as a precious painter and a sovereign witness. But his appreciation, I want you to believe with me, will yet be carried much further, and then . . . your really beautiful time will come.

There is always recurrent talk of a Howells revival, but it has never really come. And Howells's case of "Russian measles" may make him seem even more outdated, now that we see the Soviet Union defunct and socialism in its death throes. His claim for the realistic social novel seems likewise passé in view of the obituary for the novel pronounced in the 1950s. Moreover, throughout the 1960s and 1970s we passed through a troubling era for the modern writer in which reality itself was called into question. As the fabulist Ronald Sukenick complained at the time, "Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version." How could there be a faithful portrait of reality if it doesn't exist?

Moreover, in the 1980s, anti-realism seemed to be the only game in town for intellectuals and writers who bought into Derrida and the deconstructionist's claim that there is such a yawning abyss between language and reality that no representation of reality is in fact possible. The fabulations of Barthelme, Barth, Burroughs, Coover, Hawkes, Pynchon, McElroy, and Sorrentino, for example, seemed to be the only thing that interested our literary critics. And this kind of writing was produced, and praised, even though the attempt to overturn consciousness of the objective world, ordinary language, and the canons of representational realism condemned the antirealists to social marginality and insured their unimportance to most fiction readers. Only Barthelme seems to have had a hint of how insignificant antirealist novelists were becoming. In *City Life*, everyone is a dwarf next to the museum's gigantic statues of Tolstoy.

It is sometimes said that TV and the movies have now displaced the realist novel in giving images of social actuality. But it is my impression that Henry James was right in remarking—in "The Future of the Novel"

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(1899)—that the novel will likely never die out because there are still neglected and unexploited too many sources of interest—"whole categories of manners, whole corpuscular classes and provinces, museums of character and condition, unvisited." We still want the novelist who will visit them and, as Howells recommended, give us a faithful portrait of what he sees. All it takes is a sharp eye for the way we live now. In the meantime we have Howells's novels, which continue along, never quite forgotten if never attaining a revival like those of Henry James.

One of those who has a sharp eye for such social categories of the kind that absorbed Howells and James is Tom Wolfe, who predicted in *The New Journalism* (1973) that "the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him." Of course this kind of novel—which is exactly that espoused by Howells—has been written all along in our time, in, for instance, the admirable work of John O'Hara, James Gould Cozzens, John Cheever, John Updike, and Louis Auchincloss. But Wolfe wanted something on the vast social scale of Balzac or the Tolstoy of *Anna Karenina*, something broader in its canvas than Cheever's Westchester County or Auchincloss's Park Avenue and downtown business worlds. Wolfe didn't get it from the younger contemporaries he challenged in 1973. So he wrote the novel himself, in *The Bonfire of the Vanities.*

The Bonfire of the Vanities is, in my view, a brilliant novel that perfectly illustrates the principles of Realism for which Howells stood. But equally of interest to me is Wolfe's essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," which appeared afterward in *Harper's* for November 1989. This essay is nothing less than "a literary manifesto for the new social novel," in which Wolfe argues for a return to "the big realistic novel, with its broad social sweep," like the fiction of Lewis, Faulkner, Hemingway, Buck, Styron, and Steinbeck. Howells goes unmentioned in that essay, as I recollect, but he is clearly the American precursor of this type of social fiction. And if there is a resurgence of it, if it experiences the great revival Wolfe calls for, then perhaps Howells's beautiful time will have come at last.

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Rude & real: Courbet in his letters

by Karen Wilkin

Why has Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) never captured the public imagination the way Gauguin or Van Gogh has? On the surface, the ingredients are all there: a rough-hewn provincial struggling to establish himself in nineteenth-century Paris, a self-taught rebel Realist painter doing battle against the forces of Romanticism, a hard-headed free-thinker stubbornly resisting a powerful art establishment and an oppressive government. Courbet's history includes a mistress who bore him a son and then fled, and a string of successors, some recorded in his paintings. There are pictures banned by the government as immoral, and secret pornographic paintings commissioned by a Turkish diplomat. There is eventual recognition and success, both artistic and political, and then disaster: the triumph of the reactionary government he had opposed for so long. Imprisonment, persecution, exile, deteriorating health, and death.

You'd think some enterprising French filmmaker would have "done" Courbet by now, since Camille Claudel and Delacroix have been dealt with. Gérard Depardieu has the right sort of hulking uncouthness for the part. (If Madonna can play Frida Kahlo, why not?) Courbet's sisters offer good character roles for women, and his circle of male friends and patrons, which included some of the most distinguished poets and writers of the period, could make *Out of Ornans* the intellectual's buddy movie. Of course, there are problems—the mature Courbet's girth and froggy eyes, devastatingly recorded in the cartoons of his lifetime, to say nothing of his hairy-chested machismo, his less than sensitive treatment of the women in his life, which might alienate the audiences who flocked to *Camille Claudel.* His pleasure in slaughtering large numbers of rabbits, game birds, and even (according to him, at least) one of the largest deer ever taken in Germany, would put off the animal-rights people and the Greens. Still, it's a good story about a complicated man.

But it is more probable that Courbet's work itself has kept the public at a distance. His paintings are difficult and as stubborn, gritty, and uningratiating as the man. They demand a great deal from their viewers, as any visitor to even as limited (and rewarding) a selection as the Brooklyn Museum's 1988 "Courbet Revisited" will recall. Intensely physical, both in terms of materials and imagery, unyielding, and often downright sexy, Courbet's art, for all its undeniable potency, is noticeably short on charm or overt, instant appeal. Landscapes and figures alike startle with their near-prurience; hunting scenes simultaneously seduce by their ravishingly painted textures and repel by their deadpan, bloodthirsty subjects. And despite the suavity of occasional passages, there is often something a little clunky—something, well, left-handed—about Courbet. It's part of his strength and his originality. At a time when academic virtuosity was admired, his paint is often dry

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and loaded, his compositions uneasy. Courbet's figures don't move with agility. Like Rembrandt's men and women, they bend as little as possible. When they raise their arms, they do so stiffly, and rarely above the shoulder. They seem swathed in uncomfortable clothing. All the constraining layers of nineteenth-century undergarments somehow make themselves felt in the poses of Courbet's men and women. When those layers come off, the bodies that are revealed are fleshy, thickset, fecund.

Of course, for anyone who cares about painting, Courbet is a towering figure, and to art historians, to critics, and to all attentive viewers, his importance to the evolution of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century art is overwhelming. Courbet's pitiless, direct vision helped to destroy the power of academic standards and to shake the supremacy of history painting. Years before the Impressionists, Courbet's art embodied Baudelaire's exhortation to "make it modern." Over the years, the man and his work have been thoroughly discussed, scrutinized, catalogued, evaluated, and re-evaluated, to the point where, the endless challenge of the paintings notwithstanding, it seems unlikely that there could be anything left to learn about the artist himself; biographers have gone into excruciating detail about even his digestive problems and his hemorrhoids. That any part of the Courbet documentation has been ignored seems improbable, yet an authoritative edition of his letters appeared only this spring.[1] This comprehensive volume, edited and translated by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, is the first complete assembly of what remains of a correspondence spanning forty years of the artist's life; it is an extraordinary addition to the already considerable Courbet literature.

Miss Chu, the head of the Department of Art and Music at Seton Hall University, has brought together and painstakingly annotated all of Courbet's known letters, including some tantalizing fragments and previously unknown documents. Ten years of research, tracking down, assembly, and translation have produced what must be the definitive text. (Miss Chu stresses that it is definitive only to date.) The voice of a distinct, complex individual emerges from Miss Chu's translation: forthright, arrogant, quarrelsome, exasperated with the status quo, passionate about his art. Given Courbet's notoriously eccentric syntax and erratic spelling, the task of turning rather inelegant French into robust, colloquial, *believable* English could not have been easy. There's a lucid introduction, careful if necessarily repetitive annotations, a comprehensive chronology, concise biographies of members of Courbet's circle whose names recur frequently in the letters, and various useful indices, including one of all the works mentioned in the correspondence, with indications of their present whereabouts. As Linda Nochlin, the well-known scholar of nineteenth-century Realism, has said about the book, it will be indispensable for Courbet and nineteenth-century specialists. It should have far wider relevance, as well.

While there's a certain amount of frustration inherent in reading only one side of a correspondence, the portrait of Courbet presented by his letters is vivid. Courbet's personality declares itself, from the earliest items in the collection, written by an eighteen-year-old schoolboy away from home for the first time and hating everything about his new situation, to the last anxious letters, written by a discouraged, bloated, terminally ill exile of fifty-eight, worried about money and unable to work. He seems strikingly modern, familiar. His recipe for avoiding obligatory military service to a regime he despised, when he drew a low conscription number, sounds like the sort of thing my contemporaries resorted to in desperate efforts to avoid complicity in the Vietnam War. (The night before presenting himself for inspection, Courbet drank a bottle of brandy "in a punch," stayed up most of the night and then drank large

1 *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, edited, and translated from the French, by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu; University of Chicago Press, 726 pages, $55.

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amounts of coffee; it worked.) His efforts to get paid for works sold out of the studio or even from exhibitions sound like the stories I hear all too frequently from younger artists today: a portion paid, the work taken, and the balance ignored, in spite of polite reminders. Courbet seems so much like someone we know (sexism and all) that it comes as a surprise to read that he has gone to the seaside to take a prescribed number of "sea baths" for medicinal reasons.

The writer of these letters is prickly, easily offended, and often defensive, but he was able to gather around him a remarkably loyal group of friends and supporters. The schoolboy who wrote home, plaintively, "I don't have a single friend," managed later to elicit powerful loyalty from many of his peers. He claimed as intimates such figures as the collector Alfred Bruyas, the social thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the novelist and poet Max Buchon, and the critics Jules-Antoine Castagnary and the pseudonymous Champfleury. Courbet and Champfleury had a major falling-out in 1863, each accusing the other of, among other things, selling out to the government, which definitively ended their friendship, but the others were lifetime members of Courbet's circle. (Of course, Bruyas, Proudhon, and Buchon were, like the painter, from the Franche-Comté, which probably counted for a lot; Buchon was also a friend from schooldays.)

Yet the person visible in the letters is not easy to like. Courbet could be funny, broadly ironic, even self-deprecating on rare occasions, and, especially with women, light and teasing, but far more often his letters reveal him to be astonishingly self-involved and self-aggrandizing—not that these are unknown characteristics among his modern-day colleagues. Then there is that rather unappealing Hemingway side—the hunting, womanizing, and general bravado. Writing to Buchon, he reports his adventures in a Montpellier brothel. One of the girls proposed that she accompany the painter on a planned trip to Switzerland: "My love does not go so far as a trip with a woman. Knowing that there are women everywhere in the world, I see no point in dragging one with me." Other aspects of travel appealed to Courbet less; from Frankfurt, he wrote:

> Here the food is at least a little better than in Belgium, but they cannot cook it, it is curious. They eat like pigs, at all hours of the day, on tables without cloths drenched with beer. There is no doubt about it, only in France do they really know how to eat. Other people are like savages . . .

As Miss Chu points out in her introduction, the letters disprove the widely held notion of Courbet as an uncultured peasant with a native gift for painting and not much else. Courbet was clearly a provincial, deeply attached to the Franche-Comté and the Jura, where his family were small landowners, but it is also clear that he was reasonably well educated and reasonably well read, wildly inventive spelling notwithstanding. (Dyslexia has recently been suggested as an explanation.) There is, however, a streak of what can only be described as peasant shrewdness in the Courbet of the letters, a man quick to see where the advantage lies for him in any situation and intensely practical. He occasionally chides his father, who dabbled in inventions, for neglecting the day-to-day running of the family farms and vineyards in order to pursue his latest brainstorm. Courbet boasted of being a self-taught painter, and he appears to have cultivated an image of himself as a plain, blunt man, but it is clear from the letters that he was fully aware of what he was doing in presenting himself in this way.

An 1851 letter to the editor of *La Presse* is typical:

> I find myself listed in this year's Salon catalogue as student of M. Auguste Hesse. To tell the truth, I must declare that I have never had a teacher. The administration's error arises, no doubt, from a practice that in recent years has become common: painters, especially those just starting out, believe it to be necessary, in order to be admitted to the exhibitions, to present themselves under the official patron-

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> age of a well-known name in the arts. . . . I myself claim to be the student of nature. . . . When I first began exhibiting about ten or twelve years ago . . . I asked M. Hesse to officially back me with his name. . . . The administration has disregarded my legitimate rectifications with inexplicable stubbornness, even though it complied with other artists who have presented similar requests. . . . I affirm that I have had only myself as a teacher and that my life's most constant effort has been devoted to the preservation of my independence.

Technically, Courbet was not a pupil of the immensely successful Hesse, although he is supposed to have visited his studio frequently and solicited his advice. Courbet was willing enough to use Hesse's name when it suited his purposes, but happy to repudiate the connection when that seemed more useful. Going public—writing to a newspaper when requests to the Salon administration failed, in order to embarrass the officials—is a characteristic Courbet strategy. Public presentation was one of his strong points. He had a grasp of the uses of publicity that seems positively of this moment.

In 1863, Courbet submitted *The Return from the Conference* (now destroyed), a deliberately provocative image of a group of drunken priests reeling through the countryside, to the Salon of that year. Although the medal he had won in the Salon of 1861 entitled him to bypass the jury, his work could still be refused on the grounds of immorality. Needless to say, the ribald anticlerical subject ensured the picture's rejection. Napoleon III instituted a Salon des Refusés that year, presumably for all works not accepted by the jury, but *The Return from the Conference* was refused even by the Refusés. Courbet made the most of the opportunity for attracting attention, since notoriety clearly would enhance the value of the picture. He wrote to his friend, the architect Leon Isabey: "If the *Priests* are accepted, there will be an uproar! I expect that so audacious a painting has never been seen." Publicity was uppermost in Courbet's mind. "Tell Champfleury to talk up the painting as much as possible in the papers so that it will be difficult for the administration to get rid of it, if it is not accepted at least with the refused works, which would be the same to me. If it is accepted [the opportunity for] speculation in Paris is lost. The only thing left is the sale of the photograph, but there are still the foreign powers . . ."

Throughout the letters, there is evidence of Courbet's aptitude for self-promotion and for the advancement of his career. While he continued to protest against the popularity of the Romanticism he loathed, and continued to paint rugged, startling, engagé pictures like *The Return from the Conference* or *Burial at Ornans* (1850, Musée d'Orsay), with its portraits of the Courbet family's neighbors in the Franche-Comté, he was quite willing to submit hunt scenes to the Salons, knowing that they would be accepted, exhibited, and favorably regarded. When his large figure compositions were rejected, he was distressed at being represented only as a painter of hunting scenes and landscapes, but the prospect of sales seemed to console him. Best of all, it appears, was controversy over works, which focused attention on the artist, something Courbet seems to have valued more than winning medals at the Salons. He was astute enough to realize that his sturdy, no-nonsense approach might meet favor outside France and he aggressively—and successfully—pursued a career in Belgium and Germany, later testing the possibilities of London and Vienna. The letters document the progress of Courbet's startlingly modern quest for success measured in sales and publicity rather than in terms of official recognition.

Careful reading of the letters reveals not only this recognizable, rather egocentric voice, but others as well. Miss Chu suggests that Courbet's public persona was a careful, deliberate invention, designed to turn characteristics that could have embarrassed him in Paris—his provincial accent, his un-

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polished manners, his continuing attachment to his family and his native province, his not having come up through the system—into engaging assets. She cites a passage in a letter written in 1850, when Courbet was thirty-one, to his close friend, the Franc-comtois man of letters Francis Wey:

> I have just embarked on the great wandering and independent life of the bohemian. . . . Don't think this is a whim, I have thought about it for a long time. Moreover, it is a serious duty, not only to give an example of freedom and character in art, but also to publicize the art that I undertake.

Miss Chu maintains that the letters after 1850 suggest that Courbet adjusted his personality, in his letters, to what he saw as the expectations of the recipient, noting the emphasis on the successful progress of his career in his letters to his family, in contrast to the concentration on social and political questions in letters to Proudhon. Miss Chu cites an 1854 letter to his patron, Bruyas, as particularly revealing of the split, at least during this period, between Courbet's public and private selves: "Behind the laughing mask that you are familiar with, I hide, deep down, grief, bitterness and a sorrow that clings to the heart like a vampire." Yet by the 1860s, Miss Chu maintains, the more consistent tone of Courbet's letters indicates that he had completely identified with his public self. It is arguable, of course, that the reverse is true—that with maturity and a modicum of success, Courbet was comfortable enough to allow his "real" self to be more visible.

At least two things remain unchanged throughout the forty-year span of the letters: Courbet's lifelong dislike of the authoritarian Imperial government and his lifelong belief in the necessity of Realism in painting. The two were, in fact, intimately related. His innate populism was reflected specifically in his unsentimental images of peasants, in paintings of ordinary people totally absorbed in hard work—for example, *Stonebreakers* (1850-51, formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, destroyed during World War II) or *The Corn Sifters* (1855, Nantes Museum). Subversive in subject, such pictures were also subversive in approach. Courbet's very way of drawing, markedly devoid of the fluency of the academics, his casual compositions, and his crusty paint handling, were all conscious rejections of the values of the official art establishment. (The large exhibitions Courbet organized of his own work, in defiance of the Salon system, and his refusal of the cross of the Legion of Honor in 1870, are further evidence of his resistance to centralized authority of any kind.)

Courbet's art, while at first notorious, could not be ignored. The critic Théophile Gautier, one of Romanticism's strongest allies, railed against Courbet's works in the Salon of 1868, to the delight of the painter, who claimed that such attention and outrage signaled the triumph of Realism; indeed, Courbet's growing reputation eventually proved him right. His continuing resistance to the officialdom of art, however, had less happy results. It's not surprising, if a long letter to Bruyas is an indication of Courbet's behavior. Even discounting a certain amount as hyperbole, Courbet emerges as less than eager to please. The director of the Fine Arts Administration invited Courbet, he wrote, "to do a painting worthy of my talent for the Exhibition of 1855." The terms? Presentation of a sketch in advance and presentation of the finished painting to a committee of artists of Courbet's choice.

> You can imagine into what rage I flew after such an overture. . . . I went on to tell him that . . . whenever my paintings might please him he was free to buy them; and that I asked him but one thing, that is, to leave art its freedom in his exhibition. . . . [I told him that] I was the sole judge of my painting; that I practiced painting not in order to make art for art's sake, but rather to win my intellectual freedom, and that by studying tradition I had managed to free myself of it; that I alone, of all the French artists of my time, had the power to represent and translate in an original way both my personality and my society.

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When the government became more liberal during the unstable years of the Franco-Prussian War and the short-lived Commune of 1871, Courbet began to play an active role in the new arts administration. As an elected official of the Commune, he was one of many advocates of the demolition of the column in the Place Vendôme, a potent symbol of the imperial Bonapartist power that the Commune hoped to supplant permanently. With the end of the Commune, Courbet was tried as a Communard, and particularly for his participation in the destruction of the column. He argued that he had urged the preservation of the bronze reliefs that sheathed it and had even saved a couple of decorative statues after the column was torn down, but he was sentenced to six months imprisonment. Early in 1873, a year after completing his prison term, Courbet was further attacked by a vindictive government, probably because he had been such a public figure in the years preceding the Commune. Ordered to pay the full cost of restoration of the Vendôme Column, his property sequestered, Courbet fled to Switzerland. Appeals to have the punishing verdict reversed failed, even after a Republican government came to power; the Republicans, in fact, produced the final verdict, in 1877, a fee of 323,000 francs for re-erection of the Vendôme Column, payable at 10,000 francs annually. Courbet, drinking heavily, developed "dropsy"—edema—and died, grotesquely swollen, on December 31.

But what of Courbet the painter? How much do his letters tell us about the execution of *Burial at Ornans* or the astonishing "personal allegory," *The Painter's Atelier* (1855, Musée d'Orsay), with its portraits of current figures in the arts and social "types," and its complex allusions to the nature of painting itself? The answer is, unfortunately, less than we might have hoped for. From time to time, Courbet provides a long, detailed description of a picture, usually addressed to one of his journalist friends. There's a very complete explanation of the rich symbolism of *The Painter's Atelier*, for example, but often, the most specific information proves to be about pictures never completed or never started in the first place. It's as though describing an image in words dissipated its power to interest Courbet. Most of the references to paintings are fairly anecdotal—stories about canvases ruined by having something fall through them, or the wish of just about everyone in Ornans to pose for the immense *Burial*. There is virtually nothing that would now be called theory. Courbet, the empiricist, used paint to express what could be expressed in images and left it at that.

The closest thing to the declaration of an artistic credo is to be found in a letter from the end of 1861, addressed to "the young artists of Paris" and published under Courbet's name in the *Courrier du Dimanche*. It is apparently an attempt to define Courbet's ideas about art and includes eminently quotable passages that seem to encapsulate his aesthetic (and his engagé beliefs):

> I deny that art can be taught . . . because I maintain that art is entirely individual and is, for each artist, simply the ability that issues from his own inspiration and his own studies of tradition. I would add that, as I see it, art, or talent, should be to an artist no more than the means of applying his personal faculties to the ideas and the events of the times in which he lives.

And later in the text:

> I also maintain that painting is an essentially concrete art form and can consist only of the representation of real and existing things. It is an entirely physical language that is composed, by way of words, of all visible objects. An abstract object, not visible, nonexistent, is not within the domain of painting. Imagination in art consists of knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing thing, but never of inventing or creating the thing itself.

Very fine, but as Miss Chu points out, it is generally accepted as having been written not by Courbet himself, but by his good

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friend, the critic Castagnary, a champion of Realism. Almost the only comparable material, assuredly by Courbet himself, is a series of aphorisms touching on morality and politics, as well as art, prepared for Proudhon, who was writing a treatise on art. Along with such high-minded sentiments as "Society must be organized in such a way that a man is not humiliated by charity and does not die from hunger," such provocative ones as "The past is useful only as education," and such repulsive ones as "Woman, who has neither aesthetic nor dialectic faculties, must be subject and faithful to man," are occasional revealing observations on art. Perhaps the most illuminating:

> Works of art are conceived all at once, and the composition, once it is well established and firmly outlined in the mind in all its details, casts it into its frame on paper or on canvas in such a way that there is no need to modify it in the course of the execution. The beauty of the execution results from the clarity of the composition.

Other revelations are often more oblique. A reference to "lionesses"—loose women with flowing, abundant hair—makes explicit the erotic role of long curling tresses in Courbet's paintings. The cascading hair of his nudes, such as the celebrated *Woman with a Parrot* (1866, Metropolitan Museum of Art), functions, it appears, as a sign of availability not only to modern-day feminist interpreters but to the artist himself. The visual equivalence of unbound, coiling hair with the tumbled clothing of the young women stretched out voluptuously in *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer)* (1856-57, Musée du Petit Palais) helps to account for the outrage with which the picture was greeted when it was shown in the Salon of 1857. Parisians reacted violently to this scandalous image of "young women of easy virtue"—obviously not "young ladies," as Courbet impudently titled them—sprawled with no thought for decorum or propriety. Once you are alerted to the meaning inherent in the distinction, the contrast is striking between the tightly dressed hair, upright poses, and high-necked garments of Courbet's portraits of "nice women," such as his sister, and the dishabille, relaxed posture, and masses of hair of "available women," such as the beautiful Irish model Jo Heffernan, Whistler's mistress, whom Courbet portrayed several times, gazing into a mirror and lifting a hank of her remarkable red hair. An 1854 portrait of *A Spanish Lady* (Philadelphia Museum of Art), complete with long, black tresses and a plentiful display of *corsage*, turns out to be not just any Spanish "lady" or a study of a model, but, on the evidence of the letters, one of Courbet's conquests.

If the letters are less than revealing about the actual making of works of art, they offer important art-historical information. Frequent references to commissioned portraits, now lost, for example, are clear evidence of just how much work of this kind Courbet did to support himself, far more than the evidence of his surviving paintings would suggest. Similarly, as Miss Chu points out, references in the letters are an invaluable aid in establishing correct dating and in separating authentic Courbets from forgeries. These benefits to scholarship apart, *Letters of Courbet* is immensely readable, lively, and absorbing. More important, perhaps, it drives us to look again at Courbet's paintings. That may be the best thing any book on or by an artist can do.

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Poems *by Nicholas Samaras, James Reidel, James Ulmer, David Baker & Luke Zilles*

Angiogram

The word sounds
like angels.

The years of my father
take me to a new vocabulary.
Procardia. Lasicks.
I fit these foreign words
inside my chest
and pace the beat of their syllables
while his breast and leg are shaved.

One November hour.
Two lives.
This is the diagram of the heart
and the hand-holding that comes of it.

In the brick courtyard,
brown oak-leaves fear the wind.
In a clean room,

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the incisions are grooved in chevron flight.
Dyes crowd through occluded passages
that close on themselves,
mapping the body's geography.
Intimate tension.
I wander long hallways like ventricles
looking for a word to translate
into health,
the specter of hope,
trying to read the doctor's face,
visualizing a gesture of prognosis that smiles
ahead of spoken reports
and terminology.

Footsteps echo like uneasy murmurs.
I look for the shadowed room of my father
where his familiar clothes
are hanging in wait for his form
to fill their animate life again,
the room to where
they will wheel the procedure back
through the hospital wing
after the aorta, the chambers,
the deadly or blessed angiogram.

The word
sounds like angels.

—*Nicholas Samaras*

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Homage to Ralph Blakelock

He used bitumen
to the "detriment of his work."

Some "moonlights" never dried—

but great darkness never dries.

It still licked the cup of bone
behind his brow,

even when he faked himself
from memory

and oiled the light
of his silver impasto,

which floated black vaults of trees
above the crazed surface of pools

where the moon came down
to bathe its master.

—James Reidel

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The kite

She was seven when they lived in Kentucky,
her father between jobs, driving a cab.
One morning he brought home
a kite, forest green with a scarlet demon,

and she flew it all July,
running and letting out string until it rose
and her demon caught the wind in his arms.
Summer ended as it always does, an eternity

of faultless blue air.
Late afternoon in October, an hour
of daylight left, the string caught on a branch
and snapped. She watched her kite

whip in the breeze, tear loose and slide away
over backyard gardens of pumpkins and squash,
a black speck that rose over the hills,
each tree like a struck match.

She told me this late at night.
In a few minutes she was quiet, her breath
measured in the darkness. I knew
how the story ended, how years later

the cancer gnawed her father to the bone
until he was almost nothing, thin air drifting
from room to dark room, and seemed to lift
out of this burning world and vanish.

—James Ulmer

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The accident

He had come to tell us everything, come
so far. He stood there dazed, broken, clutching
a torn sleeve, yet calmed as by sureties
of habit or instinct. All around us
the linden trees, the dusted cedars leaned
their shag shadows into the night—the old
inhalations brushed quietly through them.
A ringlet of glass encircled his skull.
Damp blood—precise as a hatline. He had
come such a distance, really, from the last
world, it was hard to see pain on his face
until sirens began to sweep nearer.
All any of us could do was stand there,
while the locusts rocked the trees in response.

—*David Baker*

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Happy

Painted in Chinese,
her wind-chimes tremble
their thin fragilities
of tinted glass,
hung in the open window
to be a trinket
of music,
a trivial chandelier of glint.
Made for the eye and ear together,
primly
it tinkles,
glitters its chill icicles
of jingling lusters,
tingalinging prisms
in kaleidoscopes
of breezy canticles.

She spends her lyric summers
on the beach,
her life of flowers,
verses,
small sea-birds,
of gathering pretty pebbles,
perfect shells,
while all the while,
set in the winter tower
of ocean,
blown and buffeted by tempest,
her island trembles
like a stricken ship.

—Luke Zilles

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Art

Irreconcilable differences

by Jed Perl

I don't think that anybody can walk through the stone entrance of the National Academy of Design, on Fifth Avenue at Ninetieth Street, without feeling that this is a place that time forgot. The Academy, which was founded by Samuel F. B. Morse in 1825, is august, but in a dusty way. There is an interesting exhibition program, yet it can't quite rid a visitor of the discouraging feeling of being in a place where too damn much dull dutiful art has been shown for too many generations. I don't think that the significant number of interesting artists who have, in recent years, become members of the Academy and worked to give it new energy and direction would disagree with this judgment. They haven't turned their attention to the National Academy because they have some particular liking for dusty academic values. They're here because there's no place else to go. They're joining up and exhibiting here because they find it to be one of the few institutions in the city that isn't openly hostile to traditional values.

This spring, the Academy mounted its 167th Annual Exhibition. This year's is one of the even-year shows to which any artist, Academy member or not, can submit work. From some twelve hundred entries, a jury composed of artists selected work by over 330 artists, one work per artist. The majority of the works are oil paintings, but there are also sculptures and watercolors and other works on paper. There is almost no work in the show that isn't representational or representationally based. A lot of it is abysmal. But the spirit of increased openness that has been spoken of in relation to the Academy in recent years is, I would say, more apparent this time around than in any of the previous shows that I've seen. There are more younger artists in the show—artists in their thirties and forties who don't get much of a chance to exhibit. There is some interesting, lively work, most of it painterly and involving some fairly high level of abstraction from nature. I hesitate to say anything beyond that. A large show in which everybody is represented by a single work isn't the best place to get to know what an artist can do. These shows play strange tricks: strong artists can look weak, weak ones can look surprisingly good. Yet the percentage of the show that is creditable or better—maybe a sixth of it, say fifty works—suggests vitality, seriousness, focus, some passion.

I feel this, but I seriously doubt that I could convince anybody who's a doubter. In order to give the work in the Academy show a chance, one has to believe that traditional structures aren't straitjackets. One has to believe that the rectangle and illusionistic space and color rhythms are still things worth worrying about. I would like to believe that these are some of the elements in a universal language, but sometimes I wonder. In the past season, as installations and assemblages have become an increasingly dominant factor on the scene, it has sometimes been difficult to believe that artists

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share any basic assumptions. On one side there's painting and self-contained sculpture and, on the other side, there's work that takes the entire gallery as its stage, what I'd call installation/assemblage. I know there are a lot of people who will claim that they can judge everything equally, but I don't really think that that's the case. Painters and sculptors begin with artistic experience. The installation/assemblage people begin with life experience. And we in the audience are forced to choose. If we choose artistic experience, we're accused of being afraid of life—and there is, of course, nothing as lifeless as bad painting (see the Academy show). But the installation/assemblage artists who are always drawing on life experience—documenting themselves and what they happen to have seen around town in the last few months—deny the lifeblood of art, which is artistic experience. Installation/assemblage has a history but it is not, whatever Harold Rosenberg may have thought to the contrary, a tradition.

There is of course better and worse in installation/assemblage, and I certainly have preferences. I prefer the personalized funhouse atmosphere that artists such as Karen Kiliminik, Perry Hoberman, and Martin Kippenberger create in a gallery to the sensory deprivation of Matthew Barney's installation earlier this season at Barbara Gladstone or the formalized glitziness of Pruitt & Early's work at Castelli. In 1990, Perry Hoberman, who is one of the art world's Rube Goldberg types, presented *Faraday's Garden* at the Postmasters Gallery. This was a room full of vintage electrical appliances and audio-visual equipment, activated by foot pads that one stepped on as one wandered amidst the jam-packed tables. For a moment, as one passed, radios, record players, and TV sets blared, mixers rattled and whirred. It was a dancing, singing garage sale, a kinetic assemblage. The gadgets and equipment, with their antiquated shapes and scuffed, scratched surfaces, lent Hoberman's installation a particularity of texture and color and shape. Despite all the clamor, *Faraday's Garden* was elegiac, nostalgic. When a gallery-goer stepped on those foot pads, good ol' suburbia gasped, throbbed, screeched, and then ground to a halt. When I saw *Faraday's Garden*, I made some notes, and meant to write about it, but this kind of jokey installation has a way of seeming less interesting to me the more I try to pin down its charms. That will not necessarily be a criticism from the artist's point of view; he may value the initial kick over anything we find ourselves thinking a day or two later. Hoberman had another show at Postmasters in April. Here the main attraction was *Excess Luggage*, a variety of old suitcases that had been outfitted with pairs of lenses, the kind used in stereo viewers. One went up to a suitcase that was mounted on the wall or on a stand on the floor, put one's eyes to the eyepieces, and saw a 3-D photographic image of a smashed car, a corporate office, two pairs of hands with bright red nail polish, and any number of other things. Again, I was engaged to a degree (though not so much as by *Faraday's Garden*), but even as I stood there the charm of the work was going going gone.

From my vantage point, installation/assemblage is marginal art—something that can be better or worse but that never achieves an imaginative expansiveness. Yet if I'm going to stick to my guns about this I must discount what I'm hearing and seeing all around me, for in the past couple of years installation/assemblage has been presented, time and again, as the main event. This isn't just in the New York galleries. Hardly a week passes without some museum somewhere announcing a new series of commissions for site-specific works. Anything that a person does in a gallery (tack up scraps cut from magazine photographs of naked bodies, cover the walls with gold foil and African-American pop-culture icons) is made to feel important. And even if one doesn't feel that installation/assemblage is important, its pervasiveness can color one's judgment. Sometimes I walk into a painting show that actually has something to it and I hear a voice somewhere in my head saying, "Jed, I'm disappointed in you. All those

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wild and crazy shows to choose from and here you are stuck with the same old paint-on-canvas stuff."

I understand the desire to stay open to everything, but the result seems to be that everything gets blurred. There's nothing drearier than trying to negotiate the non-negotiable. That way lies madness. We are not all one. Sometimes it's best to cut our losses and cite irreconcilable differences.

Bill Jensen's show at the Washburn Gallery in April wasn't paint on canvas, but, mostly, ink on paper, yet Jensen is an artist who uses graphic media in a fluid, painterly way. This was the first of his shows in a number of years that I've found exciting. The suite of mostly small-sized drawings is, I think, the best body of work that he's produced since the etchings that were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1986. Biomorphic imagery and scruffy, earthy surfaces have become clichés in the decade and more since Jensen first showed. For a while a couple of years ago it seemed that anybody who got hold of an old biology textbook could have a career. Jensen's imagery isn't any more original than Terry Winters's or Gregory Amenoff's or a lot of other people's; but his relation to his biomorphic forms is more alive, more open-ended. Jensen's paintings are distinguished by the intensity of their surfaces; he creates a passionate impasto. Alone among these artists, Jensen can show us that he's astonished by forms.

It's a measure of Jensen's determination to keep himself surprised that he's never been willing to repeat himself. He has pushed his work into more complicated spatial structures, so that whereas in the early Eighties the typical Jensen was almost iconic, today the typical Jensen is a sort of landscape. Nothing in his work was ever flippant or facile, but in recent years, especially in his bigger paintings, he has often worked his way into elaborate combinations of forms that suggest nothing more than a fear of leaving the job half-done. Jensen's taste for stagy landscapes is now at war with his gift for surfaces; in general, the paintings become less poetic as they become more illusionistic.

This is all by way of perhaps explaining why it's Jensen's graphic work—first the prints, now the ink drawings—that has been his best work of recent years. Graphic art is always an art of surfaces, and it is here that Jensen has been able to extend his experiments with surface even as he complicates his imagery. One usually assumes that drawing is a process by which an artist discovers or develops a group of forms that he will then use in his paintings. Jensen's new ink drawings are so much stronger than the paintings that preceded them that they suggest the reverse process. The forms that he laboriously developed in the paintings—snaky tubular things, often ringed with stripes; crevices and mouth-like forms; mountainous, rocky things; watery, turbulent passages—have become a vocabulary that he can use freely in his drawings.

Because most of the works are small (usually less than two feet in any direction) we take a close-up view of them. Composition, in the sense of rhythms that move across the rectangle, has never been one of Jensen's strengths, so his work naturally operates best on an intimate scale, when we can go very close to it and not be troubled by the frequently unresolved way in which the image fits the frame. Here Jensen develops some lovely mysterious effects. We're seeing layer upon layer of thickish ink strokes, and the layers that are underneath have a worn, rubbed-out quality which lends the images an echoing, pewter-toned beauty. I am told that the technique involves applying a number of different kinds of ink with a brush, waiting ten or fifteen minutes until the ink sets, sponging some of it off, then repeating the process any number of times. But the specifics aren't all that important. What's important is that these surfaces suggest hidden depths. The technique is so inventive and yet so guileless, it brings to mind some of Paul Klee's elaborate graphic effects in his works on paper. This is not technique for technique's sake. The technique is only important insofar as it gives these sheets

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of paper an aura of boundlessness. Jensen sets his unlovely, awkward, bulbous forms into this boundless space. His way with brush and ink recalls Oriental calligraphy, not the bird-like, darting kind, but the coiled, slow-moving kind. Jensen treats biomorphism as a fantasy language, and the effect is not unlike the Westerner's experience of looking at Oriental calligraphy, which the Occidental mind tends to regard as a fantasy language, too. The familiarity of the forms is a pleasing counterpoint to the strangeness of the presentation; the effect is forceful yet muffled. Jensen's black ink yields gray magic.

Perfection is a fair description of the show of a few dozen drawings by Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) that was mounted at the New York Studio School in March and April. "We have not yet caught up with the extreme sophistication of [Vuillard's] successes" was the painter Fairfield Porter's observation in a review he wrote on the occasion of a Vuillard show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1954. The same could be said today. In the month after the Vuillard drawing show opened there were two shows by painters who have a kinship with Vuillard. A show of paintings by Porter (who died in 1975 at the age of sixty-eight) was mounted at the Leubsdorf Gallery at Hunter College in April and May. And in April, John Heliker showed his recent paintings at Kraushaar.

The Vuillard show at the Studio School, organized by Ann Dumas, focused on what remains the least understood and most fascinating aspect of Vuillard's work: the realism of his late period. Most of the small pencil drawings collected here were from after 1900, when Vuillard had moved away from the densely mosaicked look of his first maturity into a greater interest in the specifics of naturalistic form. In his 1954 review of the Modern Vuillard show, Porter observed that "Only Vuillard could make a masterpiece that in all superficial ways resembles a magazine illustration, in all ways except in everything." Detail—the detail that goes into magazine illustrations—is something that had seemed to disappear from painting after 1900, at least from serious painting. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Impressionists, by fixing their gaze on nature as no one had before, dissolved the details into an overall harmony that became the new standard for truth to nature. The Impressionists in effect severed the connection between truth and detail that had been a cornerstone of Western naturalism since the later Middle Ages, when the illuminators began to fill the margins of the manuscripts with perfectly described fragments of the natural world. Yet naturalistic detail, even after Impressionism, still had its attraction. In the first decade of the new century, when Vuillard's work was becoming increasingly naturalistic, the Cubists were also beginning to reintroduce naturalistic detail into their work, after their own fashion, in the form of trompe l'oeil.

For modern eyes, one of the peculiarities of Vuillard's fondness for detail is that it appears unironic, untroubled. Yet the beautiful pencil drawings at the Studio School suggested all kinds of layerings and equivocations. The view of the world is only superficially superficial. The small pencil lines twist and turn with such abandon —they're so utterly free—that even as they assemble into the particularities of a chair, a table, a face, a wall full of pictures, they're dissolving each substance into abstract atmosphere. Vuillard's return to verisimilitude takes place in the wake of Impressionism, and the object can never again quite regain its autonomy. Vuillard's anti-Impressionist emphasis on light-dark contrast is handled with an Impressionist flair for overall lighting, so that the effect is a diffused chiaroscuro. This can be mistaken for academic Impressionism, but it is in fact an altogether original synthesis. The one pastel included in the Studio School show—a portrait of Sam Salz that's as worked-up as any oil painting—could barely suggest where Vuillard was going with these drawings; but it was good that it was there, since there isn't a place in New York where one can get much

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of a sense of Vuillard's wildly ambitious late style. Here the chiaroscuro knitwork of the drawings is carried into full color, with an effect of overloaded detail that generally puts people off. Porter recounts how, "As [Vuillard's] paintings became less 'intimate' he gained in his remarkable ability to put together everything before him, including the jar of Vaseline that the Countess Anna de Noailles asked her maid to remove, because 'the master is likely to paint it.'" Porter goes on to call this particular painting a failure. My own feelings about the portraits of Countess de Polignac (1932) and Dr. Viau in his dental surgery (1937) remain unresolved. We may not yet have caught up with these late portraits, which are as much as anything portraits of the offices and drawing rooms of the haute bourgeoisie and fashionable aristocracy of early-twentieth-century France. Perhaps Vuillard's rendering is just that—rendering. But perhaps we still look at these audacious works too much through our prejudices. The drawings at the Studio School show a miracle worker at work. If the paintings seem to reflect some failure of nerve, I do not feel ready to say whether the failure is the artist's—or ours in being unable to meet his terms.

Certainly Vuillard's work is uneven. The unevenness is in part explained by an observation that Porter made about Vuillard's close friend Bonnard—an observation that also goes for Vuillard. "Though he was an intellectual, he had no Idea." This is true of Porter as well. The artist who rejects an overriding idea is bound to go off on interesting tangents, and these are bound to lead to an unevenness in the work. The Porter show, made up of paintings from the collection of the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, where Porter lived, was organized by William Agee, who is a professor at Hunter. It ranged from the 1930s to the 1970s, and included works in all genres: landscape, still life, interior, portrait. The most purely Vuillardesque work was *Laurence Typing*, from 1952. Porter tended to live in interiors full of nineteenth-century furnishings, so the Vuillardism is in part in the setting; but the structure is also Vuillardesque, with the crowding of the interior décor moving toward a pictorial crowding that fills the picture surface with activity from end to end. A curiosity of the show was two very closely related versions, from 1973, of a single composition, *Lizzie, Guitar and Christmas Tree*. Porter basically did the same painting twice, in order to see, perhaps, how slight changes in color and drawing could affect the whole. These two paintings are characterized by a gracelessness in drawing that was one of Porter's keynotes, a gracelessness that he sometimes managed to make riveting. Here the crabbed, odd perspective in which various objects are drawn and juxtaposed reflects the intentness of the girl playing the guitar. It's a composition in which one doesn't know where to go when. One doesn't know how to take in the Christmas tree lights and the lighted lamp, foreground and background, music stand and guitar case and bulky figure. I think this kind of Porter, in which he improvises a structure based on some odd combination of elements, is the heart of his work. The straight portraits are in general not successes. Conventional compositions and structures do not bring out Porter's strengths, which are idiosyncratic. He pulls away from dealing with a face, ending up with a pale oval inscribed with a few features (though there is one small, pungent hawk-like self-portrait head in this show). An immense attempt at an outdoor portrait (*Harry Striebel*) is horrible. Among the most convincing works are some landscapes done in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the Seventies. As a landscape painter, Porter had a fine feeling for small towns and college towns—for odd views. Amherst, both in fall-foliage glory and under a blanket of snow, sets the artist into an easygoing, almost playful mood. I don't know what fraction of Porter's work will hold up, maybe a quarter, but that is enough to give him a place. He began to show in the early 1950s, when de Kooning (a close friend who helped Porter find a gallery) was king. Porter's work makes a link between the concreteness of Abstract Expressionist paint-

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handling and the concreteness of nineteenth-century naturalism. Porter redid Vuillard after de Kooning.

Porter's canvases recall Vuillard's packed surfaces; John Heliker's paintings bring to mind the open-weave of Vuillard's drawings, where the objects can appear to be coming into focus and dissolving at one and the same time. Heliker, who is in his eighties, paints in thin washes of color; the surfaces are veiled and shimmering. His recent show included all kinds of subject matter: landscape, still life, portrait, figure composition. The centerpiece of the show was a composition of three figures in a room, called *The Visit II*. These people—probably two men and a woman, though it is hard to tell—are gathered at a table; one of them is sitting on the table. Their faces are indistinct; the most striking single element is a jutting profile. There are suggestions of an armoire, perhaps of other furniture. This is in some respects a rather conventional genre subject, and Heliker is no doubt attracted to the simplicity of the subject because it is an ideal foil for the circumspections of his brush. The work recalls a kind of literary modernism in which a foursquare nineteenth-century subject is treated in a consciously ambiguous, twentieth-century manner. The painting is about the undertones of an encounter.

The Visit II is one of the series of blue-green visions that, over the past decade and more, have been Heliker's great achievement. In these works the focus is on the figure—three people gathered around a table, a small group working in a print shop, a young man standing in front of an easel. These canvases are among Heliker's larger ones, five or more feet high, but they have the unforced casualness of sketches. They look to have been invented all at once. They're not so much constructed as summoned up, with an apparent rapidity that's unlike anything else in contemporary art. It is natural to speak of the idea of memory in relation to these paintings, yet I am not sure that memory is what they're about. Their blurred beauty is far too immediate to suggest experience recollected in tranquility. The figures in these compositions are not so much people who the artist remembers as they are phantoms that he pulls out of the thin washes of his paint. They're people who exist only in the mysterious medium of oil paint. As storytelling the compositions are vague. But as painting they are exact. The color is the color of sea and air—of transparency and translucency, with, in *The Visit II*, just a few harsh coppery oranges that lend earthiness and stability.

While Heliker's show was up at Kraushaar, one could also see one of his paintings in the Academy, where he has exhibited for decades and been a member since 1979. He epitomizes everything that such an institution ought to be. There is a vein of gold in Heliker's work. And during a long career as a teacher—at Columbia University, the New York Studio School, the Art Students League, and the Parsons School of Design—he has not so much led his students to the mother lode as he has given them the gumption to go out and look. He has given several generations the incalculable gift of his sensibility. His exhibitions leave his friends and admirers feeling a little high. The work is assured yet relaxed; it might be said to be dreamy, but it has not a trace of naïveté. There is self-knowledge, and, triumphantly, none of the hardness that often comes with self-knowledge. In the catalogue of his 1968 Whitney retrospective one learns that during the late 1940s Heliker was close friends with Merce Cunningham and John Cage, and his friendship with two of New York's most celebrated Dadaist spirits suggests that Heliker knows exactly what the irreconcilable differences are all about. No one who ignores those differences can be a modern artist. No one who lingers on them can be a significant artist. In *The Visit II* Heliker again goes his own way: he demonstrates the relevance of genre painting to a period that doesn't believe in genres. Heliker is the most purely intuitive traditionalist at work today. He's the last serious romantic.

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Theater

Revived & well

by Donald Lyons

A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams's 1947 play, went through a number of versions in its author's workshop, beginning in late 1944. There was an "Italian" version set in Chicago with Bianca visiting sister Rosa and her "effeminate" husband, Lucio. A later working, called "The Primary Colors," is set in Atlanta. Blanche visits sister Stella, married to Ralph Stanley, "a healthy Irish peasant type with urban modifications." Blanche is peppy, snazzy, and flirtatious. In another version, called "The Passion of a Moth," Blanche and Stanley make consensual love; she is alone onstage at the curtain, packing a bag for Mobile. In the penultimate script, "The Poker Night," a catatonic Blanche starts screaming at the end and has to be hauled off in a straitjacket. These early versions, some fragmentary and all reposing in the Harry Ransom Humanities Center of the University of Texas at Austin, are cited in passing by Brenda Murphy in her *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan*,[1] a book that contains some interesting material but is vitiated by a fashionable notion that the give-and-take collaborations she describes somehow compromise Williams's authorship of his plays and by an inane jargon that, for example, calls blocking "kinesic encoding." Williams apparently had trouble with the play's ending until the last minute. He vacillated between having Blanche simply leave on her own steam, throw herself in front of a train, or go mad; he settled for a variant of the last. Apropos of this, *Playbill* quotes a telling anecdote. A friend told Williams of a Moscow staging of *Streetcar* where Blanche marries Mitch and lives happily ever after. The friend urged Williams to remonstrate, but he merely said, "Oh, Honey, no! Blanche would have conned her way out of that home in two weeks and of course she'd have married Mitch. Don't worry about it."

One should be thankful that Williams thought better of the Italianate Chicago draft, if only because Williams's "Italian" plays, *The Rose Tattoo* and *Orpheus Descending*, flaunt a cornily "primitive" notion of Italians. As for Atlanta, it was, in 1947, too class-structured, too Margaret Mitchell, for this story. An Irish Stanley would have suited the South then, though, and the embryonic "Ralph" anticipates a later, more benign Kowalski, Jackie Gleason's Ralph Kramden. It also echoes in the play's exchange:

STELLA: Stanley's Polish, you know.

BLANCHE: Oh yes. They're something like Irish, aren't they?

STELLA: Well—

BLANCHE: Only not so—highbrow [*They both laugh* . . .].

New Orleans doubtless represented a middle ground between the dreamland Missis-

1 *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theatre*, by Brenda Murphy; Cambridge University Press, 201 pages, $37.95.

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sippi of Blanche and the embryonic world of bowling alleys and "plants" that is Stanley's. In one sense, the New Orleans of the play has elements of a gentrified downtown of the 1980s, with the races in contiguity and harmony and a flavor of open-air, fresh-produce communalism, but the main note was of the postwar boomtime. The Kowalskis of America had scrambled out of the social cellar during the war. Stanley, a natural leader, had risen to Master Sergeant, the highest noncom rank, and was a comer in the "plant." Stella was—what? a secretary or riveter in the plant?—when she met Stanley. Focusing on such considerations is the spring-cleaning job done by Gregory Mosher's recent production of the play at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Forget the mythic and symbolic static; *Streetcar* here emerges as a story about a certain young married couple with an in-law problem.

Blanche and Stanley are two of a kind —bright, ironic, manipulative, selfish. Listen to this from their first encounter:

STANLEY: My clothes're stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable? [*He starts to remove his shirt.*]

BLANCHE: Please, please do.

STANLEY: Be comfortable is my motto.

BLANCHE: It's mine too . . .

STANLEY: You know you can catch cold sitting around in damp things, especially when you been exercising hard like bowling is. You're a teacher, aren't you?

BLANCHE: Yes.

STANLEY: What do you teach, Blanche?

BLANCHE: English.

STANLEY: I never was a very good English student. How long you here for, Blanche?

BLANCHE: I—don't know yet.

STANLEY: You going to shack up here?

BLANCHE: I thought I would if it's not inconvenient for you all.

STANLEY: Good.

BLANCHE: Travelling wears me out.

STANLEY: Well, take it easy.

Aggression alternates here with accommodation; demotic coarseness holds hands with a hospitable decorum; menace is checked by manners. This civil Stanley could be *used* by Blanche if she plays her cards right (cards are his hobby, though) or reads him right (reading is her vocation). But her pride and silliness will ignite his insecurity and violence. It can all be foreseen in this miraculous dialogue, as taut as a violin string and as funny as a pie in the face. Williams himself and many of his critics talk solemnly of his debt to D. H. Lawrence, from whom he got only a fatuous rhetoric of sex; his true precursors are Twain and Faulkner, great native comic writers. But the artistry of dialogue like that is original, too, in its mixture of naturalistic voice and a deep, Chekhovian music of character—especially in his best women, funny and clever and, in an odd way, free.

Streetcar has its problems. Poor Blanche's past is overloaded: the maudlin and phony saga of gay young husband Allan's suicide; the grim family deaths; the seduction of students; her service as a one-woman bordello for a local army camp; various unspecified misbehavior at the Hotel Flamingo. Williams piles it on, almost spoiling the Blanche realized onstage with such lurid self-projections. And the ending he perhaps never got right. What occurs never seems the ineluctable fate of this woman. That Moscow ending might have something to say for itself.

Gregory Mosher, best known as a stager of David Mamet plays, announced that he did not have "a reinterpretation . . . to offer." But his scrubbing away of encrustations amounts to one. The set, by Ben Edwards, makes sense for once as an actual apartment. Staircase and street, where quiet chats and passionate reconciliations occur, are stage right; the bathroom, where fantasies breed, is stage left; the important icebox is in the middle. We are not in "the mind of Blanche," which is just as well. As was the case in the original production in this theater in 1947, the play's eleven scenes are interrupted by curtain-lowering pauses; this fits with the slow, languorous tempi throughout. The performers are all excellent, impersonating actual, ordinary, plausible people and not monsters or morons, as

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is the danger with productions operating too much in the shadow of the 1951 Kazan-Brando-Leigh film. Jessica Lange shows up in a smart white suit; she is a tired and strained but funny Blanche. Miss Lange excels in those long sisterly chats (the two sometimes a stage apart) with the Stella of Amy Madigan. Madigan's loose, laughing energy paints a happy Stella—intelligently and not bovinely happy. She likes and resembles (to a point) Blanche. Mosher stages the sexual passages between Stella and Alec Baldwin's Stanley as playful routines. The curse of familiarity is off even the desolate and much-parodied bellowing of "Stella!" as Madigan boldly subdues Stanley's pain by stroking his back with her feet. Baldwin tries to keep Stanley as ordinary as possible; he risks losing a certain "explosiveness" but it is a risk well taken. Baldwin cannily stresses Stanley's dull bewilderment at Blanche; there is for a good while a chance Stanley can be contained. Seeing the Mitch of Timothy Carhart is, again, like meeting Mitch for the first time; this Mitch is not goofy but articulate and attractive and decent—and believable as a pal of Stanley's. Aida Turturro does wonders with the upstairs neighbor Eunice, a simple, sensible, and kind woman.

Jessica Lange finally holds the thing together, though, with her convincing picture of an ironic and grown-up woman boxed in by her own lies. True, her voice is small, and she could have done without the accent altogether (the script is not, after all, in dialect and there is no reason to go on echoing the intonations of Vivien Leigh). But Lange captures a Chekhovian sadness by the end. The whole ensemble shows how to use movie stars—use smart ones.

Streetcar now looks to be what the Thirties had been trying for in so many earnest, humorless ways—a first-rate play of American urban life.

Damon Runyon published his short-story collection *Guys and Dolls* in 1932. *Guys and Dolls: A Musical Fable of Broadway* was put together in 1950 with book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows, music and lyrics by Frank Loesser. The Runyon cosmos of gamblers, chorines, and salvationers is a cloudless fantasy of sin, sex, love, and redemption perfect for the form of musical comedy. The current revival at the Martin Beck Theatre takes *Guys and Dolls* in just the right direction; it becomes a flamboyant parable and a kinaesthetic dream. The overall look is that of a hallucinatory brilliance (direction by Jerry Zaks; sets by Tony Walton; costumes by William Ivey Long; lighting by Paul Gallo). A cop stalks about in a Day-Glo mustard suit; dancing girls perform in blue in their scarlet Hot Box club; gamblers sport pastel zoot suits; Havana, weekend hotspot, is all tropical white; a sewer is like the inside of an artichoke; the bold chromaticisms of New York streets—that is, the Times Square of Runyonesque mythology—by day and by night and at predawn 4 A.M. light (the lovely "My Time of Day") recall palettes from Stuart Davis to Edward Hopper. Runyonland becomes one of the great inventions of the American theater.

The choreography is flashy, but *Guys and Dolls* is less a dance show than a song show—a personality show, really. The four principals are perfect. Peter Gallagher as inveterate gambler Sky Masterson and Josie deGuzman as gospeller Sarah Brown bring the right charm—not too serious, not too light—to these potentially dull ingénue roles. Their story of mismatched love has to play; it is their music ("I'll Know"; "I've Never Been in Love Before") that proffers a happiness alien alike to the rigidities of the mission and the squalors of the sewer. The comic leads are extraordinary. Nathan Lane is the permanently befuddled but besmitten Nathan Detroit, hotter for the dangers and excitements of the next crap game than for the narcosis of matrimony. Detroit carries a lot of the book, and Lane's skills at comic characterization and delivery make the book *almost* as joyous as the musical parts. Miss Adelaide, star dancer at the Hot Box, perennial fiancée of Detroit, and deliverer of "Adelaide's Lament [A person can develop a cold]," "Take Back Your Mink," "Sue Me," and "Marry the Man Today," is the soul of

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Guys and Dolls. It is thus uncommonly satisfying to note that Faith Prince, who was murdered in the deadly *Nick & Nora*, returns triumphantly to life in the spring of this show. Miss Prince wrings the neck of every convention of the showgirl-hungry-for-respectability role but at the same time softens and sweetens Adelaide from the brittle caricature Vivian Blaine made of her. Not unlike Jessica Lange as Blanche a few blocks north, Miss Prince finds the person inside this pile of wacky blonde eccentricities. She reminded one critic of Judy Holliday, but I thought of the likable raunch of Jean Harlow.

Miss Prince is helped by the modulations added by orchestrator Michael Starobin to the original orchestrations. Mr. Starobin will forgo and defer and soft-pedal the in-your-face climaxes of the songs; there is a light dusting of jazz syncopation here that goes with the "italics" of the rest of the production. (Everyone is overmiked, but that is a widespread vice today—one eschewed, however, at the current revival of the other Loesser masterwork, *The Most Happy Fella*.)

C. S. Lewis wrote: "no genius is so fortunate as he who has the power and wish to do well what his predecessors have been doing badly. He need neither oppose an existing taste nor create a new one: he has only to satisfy a desire which is already aroused. . . . Perhaps it is under such conditions that the perfect work comes, ripe and not over-ripe: a Jane Austen following on a Fanny Burney, a Racine on a Corneille, an Ariosto on a Boiardo." In this spirit, one might call *Guys and Dolls* the *Pride and Prejudice* of musicals, a sunny and perfect work poised between periods. A decade earlier, it would have been a shapeless revue. A decade later, it would have been sociology. Loesser, not Rodgers/Hammerstein, now seems the heir of Gershwin (Gershwin would be, of course, not Fanny Burney, but a combination of Fielding and Richardson). After *Guys and Dolls*, the next significant "New York" musical was the 1957 Bernstein/Sondheim *West Side Story*, which may be said to have begun the "musical" era we are still in.

This era is epitomized by *Falsettos*, a William Finn musical very much in the Sondheim mode. In Act I, with no book, five characters sing of their problems, relationships, and psychiatric coping. Indeed, one character *is* a psychiatrist; the others are husband, husband's male lover, wife, and young son. This part centers on the difficult adjustments to be made by the wife (she has a conventionally show-stopping number called "I'm Breaking Down") and the son, Jason (one ensemble is called "Everyone Tells Jason to See a Psychiatrist"). A nonstop barrage of pseudo-Puccini psychopatter drums into us that we must fall in love and accept love and tolerate love and love love. To trite and formulaic music, the lyrics crack Broadway jokes about Judaism, homosexuality, and psychiatry. The performers are so overmiked that one seems to be present at the lip-synched playing of a recording. Where is that voice coming from?

In the second act, the lover dies of AIDS. In the tradition of Shirley Temple movies, it is the child who proves the wisest and most reconciling person around. After a futile plea to God to please cure the patient, Jason insists on having his Bar Mitzvah at the dying man's bedside. (Before that, there are lots of tired jokes about Jewish kids who can't play baseball.) Mr. Finn reheats old conventions and adds to the pot instant new conventions. Two lesbian neighbors (one the attending physician and the other the Bar Mitzvah caterer) join the two male lovers in singing about "we four unlikely lovers." But it is all generic; no people, just correct types, are created in the art of Mr. Finn. The lover's death lacks artistic force for we scarcely know anything of the man —except his emblematic victimhood. He might have been a stranger hit by a car. What we see are squash games and then a hospital room. In *Falsettos* the audience is expected to do the work of the imagination. Eric Bentley once remarked of Paddy Chayefsky that he "doesn't even bother to write characters; he writes audiences." In this respect, Mr. Finn emulates Chayefsky.

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Music

The charms of Darius Milhaud

by Samuel Lipman

We hear a lot these days about new operas, but precious little about older operas from the relatively golden days of musical composition between the wars, operas that remain new to us because they have been so little performed under adequate conditions. Two shining examples of these rarely revived riches came to light at the beginning of May in Manhattan: a pair of short operas by Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), presented at Florence Gould Hall by the French Institute/Alliance française and L'Opéra français de New York. Milhaud, of course, was a marvelously gifted French composer, whose music was formed by an idiosyncratic mixture of Provençal folk music, Brazilian dance rhythms, jazz, and twentieth-century modernism, all brought together by a strong *Conservatoire* education and Gallic cosmopolitanism.

The two operas, *Le pauvre matelot* (to a libretto by Jean Cocteau) and *Esther de Carpentras* (to a libretto by Armand Lunel), were written in 1926 and 1925, respectively. *Le pauvre matelot* brilliantly uses French sea tunes to describe a chilling story of a sailor's return home after a long absence. Unrecognized by his wife, the sailor first must test her fidelity by posing as a rich friend of her supposedly destitute husband; when the sailor goes to sleep, his wife kills him and robs him, thinking that by so doing she is ensuring a prosperous life with her husband. *Esther* uses Franco-Jewish chants to retell, in the medieval ghetto world of Carpentras, the biblical story of Esther's successful attempt to save her people from Haman. As the Jews celebrate their biblical deliverance with a masquerade, a young Cardinal appears to demand their conversion, or their exile or death; but the French Esther manages to soften his heart, the edict goes unenforced, and the Jews of Carpentras are saved.

Le pauvre matelot uses only four characters, and was here performed in Milhaud's own scoring for thirteen instruments. *Esther* uses many characters, and, like *Le pauvre matelot*, was originally scored for a large orchestra; on this occasion, however, it was performed by fourteen instruments in a reduction made by the French conductor Bernard Desgraupes under the supervision of the composer's widow, who attended the New York performances. The production of *Esther* was further and intelligently simplified by the use of a chorus in the pit to sing many of the parts in the work's frequent group scenes, thus allowing the stage chorus to concentrate on movement and mime. The sets for both operas, though not elaborate, were highly effective; the stage direction was brilliant; the vocal execution was remarkably secure and pleasant to hear, with a particularly fine performance coming from tenor Charles Workman in the high-flying and difficult role of the Cardinal; the conducting, by Yves Abel, produced an always transparent sound from the small orchestra, and was never less than lively and beguiling.

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Hats off, then, to L'Opéra français de New York; long may it thrive in our suffering Manhattan. But all credit to the performers aside, the real star of the production was—as it should be—the composer himself. Darius Milhaud, with whom I studied many years ago at Mills College in California, composed hundreds and hundreds of pieces. He had an extraordinary facility for writing music. The notes flowed from his pen, and it seemed as if he never blotted a one. Along with Poulenc, Honegger, Tailleferre, Auric, and Durey, he was a member in the late Teens and the early Twenties of the famous and iconoclastic *Les Six*, but he always kept his own personality separate. That personality was both witty and grave; in all of his uses of folk material and jazz, he never lost track for a moment of the deeper sentiment that underlay both his material and his own aesthetic outlook. As the gay 1920s metamorphosed into the patriotic 1940s, his charm, in works ranging from the jazzy *La création du monde* (1923) through the *Suite provençale* (1936) to the *Suite française* (1944), was his strongest suit, though large numbers of his weightier works from these decades await rediscovery—and discovery. After World War II, a certain dry and acerb character crept into his music, a music that increasingly seemed—and I stress the word seemed—to amount to little more than a master going through the motions of his craft.

In the years since my studies with him ended, I have often reflected that our lack of appreciation of Milhaud might well lie less in his works than in ourselves—as both musicians and audience. Milhaud's compositions are always difficult to play, and I know from personal experience that his late works are extremely difficult. From the performer's standpoint, what was, and is, difficult about Milhaud's music is the amount of technique, talent, and persistence it takes to penetrate through his many notes to the sheer tunefulness and delight in music-making that reside within. In these matters, of course, the audience is at the mercy of the performers; what the performers cannot recognize in the music cannot be perceived by the listeners. Thus the task of putting Milhaud in his rightful musical place calls for a massive effort from his executants, an effort one fears is hardly likely to be made at the present time.

What was so wonderful about these performances of two short and early Milhaud operas was that the performers captured the wit and the tunes in all the sounds the artist wrote. The result was an effervescent evening of the best of twentieth-century music—bright, sophisticated, serious in implication, and masterly in execution. The capacity audience was charmed, and so was I. As for Milhaud, it is high time (however unpropitious this time may be), on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, for the exploration of his oeuvre to begin.

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Fiction chronicle

The living & the dead

by Bruce Bawer

We live in a godless century—not an Age of Doubt (as I heard a clergyman preach the other day) so much as one of indifference to religion. Intelligent men and women in the Western world today tend to have a logical positivist's sense of what it means for something to be "real"; those who do find themselves experiencing spiritual hunger, meanwhile, tend to appease it by embracing shallow, trendy notions of the supernatural that represent a challenge neither to their own styles of life nor to contemporary cultural values, and that require little in the way of intellectual struggle or moral self-discipline. Yet there have been inklings of a possible turnaround, at least in the world of letters. Last autumn, in an essay on the literary life in the 1990s, I noted approvingly that a number of recent novels had dealt seriously with religion and religious commitment, giving one new hope for the possibilities of *fin de siècle* fiction; it is a pleasure to report that the publishers' spring lists contain a few titles that sustain that hope. Without question, the most extraordinary of these books is Alice McDermott's third novel, *At Weddings and Wakes*.[1] Since I have reviewed it elsewhere, suffice it to say here that this study of an extended family in mid-1960s Brooklyn and Long Island, whose lives are suffused with Roman Catholic images and haunted by the specter of untimely death, is a profoundly affecting *memento mori*, as exquisitely conceived and executed as first-rate Balanchine. Also very much worth noting is the young English writer James Lasdun's short-story collection *Three Evenings*, whose lead story, "Ate/Menos, or the Miracle," is a *tour de force* about a young non-believer who, after taking communion at an Anglican church and thereby "tapp[ing] the energies of ritual without submitting [him]self to the acts of faith it asked in return," undergoes a bizarre experience that poses compelling questions about the self and the supernatural, human freedom and power, and "the monumental armour of stasis with which the material world cloaks its fabled Heraclitean flux."[2]

Alas, some of the more prominent new works of fiction, while making considerable use of biblical quotations and featuring deeply religious characters, can't be said to offer very impressive literary treatments of the subject of faith. Of these, the most heavily hyped is doubtless Annie Dillard's first novel, *The Living*.[3] For years—is it necessary to say this?—Dillard has been our leading huckster of the Infinite: in several nonfiction best-sellers, she has carried on coyly about the nexus among man, nature, and the divine, and/or about the sacredness

1 *At Weddings and Wakes*, by Alice McDermott; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 213 pages, $19.

2 *Three Evenings*, by James Lasdun; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 145 pages, $18.

3 *The Living*, by Annie Dillard; HarperCollins, 397 pages, $22.50.

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of the writer's vocation. These books, which have made her the center of what I think it fair to call a personality cult (she is, in the view of many of her adherents, a Thoreau for Our Times), are rife with cryptic proclamations that recall the midnight metaphysics of many a heavy-partying undergraduate intellectual: "Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery." "Time and space are in touch with the Absolute at base." Such aphorisms are meant to be profound and poetic, but the more of them one reads, the harder it is not to believe that Dillard is, like many another popular guru, an utter fraud. There is, in any event, little indication that she gives thought to the moral implications of her *mots* or to their consistency (or lack thereof) with one another.

Yet her unsystematic cosmic gush has won Dillard astonishing plaudits from people who, bathed in the glow of her putative passion for birds and shrubs and God, seem to be blinded to her flaws and contradictions. In a rhapsodic profile in the April 26 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*—which is accompanied by a highly dramatic, full-page photograph of Dillard standing in a cemetery, boldly contemplating the universe—Mary Cantwell celebrates the fact that in the "truly moral life" that Dillard endeavors to live "there is no room for self-promotion." (Apparently being profiled in the *Times Magazine* doesn't count.) In case we don't get the point, a second photograph (also highly dramatic), in which a silhouetted Dillard stares into the camera looking *très* sincere, bears the following caption: "Dillard has made little time for self-promotion. 'Would Jesus have gone on television?'" What's next? Dillard on "The Tonight Show" telling Jay Leno, "I'm really a very private person"? Dillard on "The Hour of Power," hawking her book and joining Bill McKibben in a duet of "Don't Fence Me In" before telling the Reverend Robert Schuller, "I'd much rather be communing with the trees and moss and ferns, but since I'm here anyway, the book is called *The Living* and it retails for twenty-two fifty"? Time and again her message appears to be that her prose doth magnify the Lord, and that he that is mighty hath (in turn) magnified her.

While it is, in short, the duty of every Christian to seek to live a Christlike life, Dillard has often seemed to be a bit too satisfied with her own efforts in this direction; while other Christian writers have helped to interest readers in the life of faith, Dillard's long suit would appear to be making converts to Dillard. Certainly she has little of substance to say about the faith that is supposedly at the center of her work. Speaking with Cantwell about her 1990 conversion from Presbyterianism to Roman Catholicism, she is astonishingly confused, puerile, inconsistent, even embarrassing. Cantwell quotes Dillard's friend Mary Gordon, the Catholic novelist, as saying that Dillard is "a religious romantic who's fallen in love with what she once said to me was 'the dirty old lady.' I think she sees the church as an embodied mystery. . . . It's as if she took a foreign lover." It might be said, in other words, that Dillard thinks about the church in much the same way that Pauline Kael thinks about the movies. A frightening thought.

Dillard has written pretty much the kind of novel one might have expected. It is, in its general outlines, a conventional historical opus, big and busy and bustling with characters, that traces the lives of several fictional settlers on Bellingham Bay in what is now Washington State during the second half of the nineteenth century. (Dillard lived in the area for five years in the late Seventies, and contemplated the local verdure in her 1977 tract, *Holy the Firm.*) The settler to whom she devotes the most attention, Clare Fishburn, identifies as a young man with America's phenomenal energy and rapid growth and glorious prospects; in Dillard's words, "[h]e felt himself as immortal as the nation whose destiny, as he put it to himself, he shared." (In this and other respects, Clare brings to mind John Wickliff Shawnessy, the self-romanticizing hero of Ross Lockridge's 1947 novel, *Raintree County.*) The book's other major figures include John Ireland

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Sharp, an idealist who wants to found a Fourierist phalanstery, and Beal Obenchain, a twisted "genius" (though Dillard never puts any interesting thoughts in his head) who reads Goethe and threatens to murder Clare. The cast of characters also contains numerous rugged white men, their noble wives, and their ruddy children, not to mention the occasional Indian (also generally noble).

Like Dillard's previous books, *The Living* floats a few feet above the ground but never takes off. She has, of course, always been noted for her meticulous description of natural phenomena, and there is no shortage of that in these pages. The difference is that here she also tenders lists of her characters' physical features and other traits. For instance: "Obenchain was tall and stout, thirty-one years old. His long head seemed to flow directly into his neck, for thick muscles covered a small jaw." And:

> Both sisters were short. June's jaw was finely modeled, where Minta's sloped; June's head was spherical and Minta's thick and almost cubical; June's dark eyes struck around sharply, where Minta's were softened by reading. June roused, flashed, directed, and pitched fits, while Minta helped, learned New Testament verses, and trained horses to jump hedges.

At first one admires the keen eye for human detail that such passages as these seem to evince. But one soon wearies at the repetition: over and over, for example, Dillard tells us that Clare is a man of "great height," a "slab-sided giant" whom "people said . . . was the tallest human being on Puget Sound. The Lummis called him Sma-Hahl-Ton, the long one." (After all this, he turns out to be only six foot three!) One begins to notice, too, that where another writer might proceed from a description of a character's appearance to an exploration of his thoughts and feelings, Dillard often prefers simply to cast about for another face or torso to immortalize. Even when dramatic events are taking place or deep emotions being felt, Dillard tends to focus on physical details: "The thick-waisted, wide-faced man, brokenhearted, and the curly-headed upright boy whom the Nooksacks called White Eyes, stood side by side in the dark while the house collapsed and flamed."

It eventually crosses one's mind, indeed, that perhaps Dillard doesn't quite realize it's possible to go further than these physical and behavioral inventories, these brief literary equivalents of reaction shots. Could it be, one finds oneself wondering, that on some level she simply doesn't understand that you can't do justice to human beings by writing about them in the same way you write about flora and fauna? This is, after all, a novel about people by someone who, in her previous work, has never shown herself to be particularly interested in the ideas or feelings of any person other than herself. One is well into *The Living* before the characters even begin to feel like something more than names on the page. Mark Twain once said that he despised the human species but loved men individually; Annie Dillard, for her part, has always seemed to be far more enchanted by humankind than she is by any one person, and *The Living* doesn't offer any compelling reason to revise that impression.

This attribute is nowhere more apparent, in *The Living*, than in her treatment of mortality. As in *At Weddings and Wakes*, the vulnerability of human life and the swiftness of time's passage are major themes here. The novel contains countless deaths; Dillard plainly wants contemporary American readers to understand that the pioneers of the Northwest lived in a world where untimely and harrowing deaths were commonplace. Presumably because she wants to suggest both how the settlers saw their earthly lives as preparation for eternity and how they learned not to be shocked by the sudden loss of loved ones—and perhaps also because she feels more uneasy in the role of storyteller than in that of naturalist—Dillard narrates at a speedy clip, hurrying past the milestones of people's lives and reporting cataclysmic

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events in brisk, matter-of-fact prose: "It was in May that the Sharp family met with an accident; they drowned, except for John Ireland." While this sort of writing helps paint a big picture of a frontier world suffused with death, however, it doesn't do much to make us care deeply about the personal torments of individual characters. The same might be said for the following passage, which comes about a third of the way into the novel:

> All deaths were accidental, or none was, for disease was just as random an accident as injury, and all die. None died prematurely, for death battened only on the living, and all of those, at any age. . . . Women took fever and died from having babies, and babies died from puniness or the harshness of the air. Men died from trafficking in superior forces, like rivers and horses, bulls, steam saws, mill gears, quarried rock, or falling trees or rolling logs. Women died in rivers, too, and under trees and rockslides, and men took fevers, too, and fevers took men. Children lost their lives as other people did, as a consequence of their bodies' material fragility; hard things smashed them, like trees and the ground when horses threw them, or they fell; they drowned in water; they sickened, and earaches wormed into their brains or fever from measles burned them up or pneumonia eased them out overnight. It was all the same and predictable except in detail, whether a heart collapsed and seized in an old woman, or a runaway buggy crushed a growing boy: the people took the boy's death harder, for they longed to have him with them longer, and to see him grown and fruitful. They were not ready for him to die, but they knew for a fact that death was ready. Death was ready to take people, of any size, always, and so was the broad earth ready to receive them. A child's death was a heartbreak—but it was no outrage, no freak, nothing not in the contract, and not really early, just soon.

In and of itself, this is a fine passage, and a splendid example of Dillard the nonfiction author at her best. The essential problem with *The Living*, alas, is that while Dillard is good at discoursing upon the ubiquity of death in the settlers' lives, it doesn't appear to come naturally to her to depict, in memorable fashion, individual deaths of the sort catalogued above. She's better, and more comfortable, when she's writing about such things in general terms.

That said, it must be added that Dillard has done her research. *The Living* is packed with the kind of details that one expects from a historical novel: Dillard knows when mining licenses were first required in the Bellingham Bay region, knows that a miner might choose to keep his gold dust in a bag made from an elk's scrotum, knows the symptoms of cholera and the Nooksack Indians' rules about the treatment of women. She writes affectingly of how mothers, when asked how many children they had,

> would include the dead ones, but distinguish. They said, "Eleven children, eight living"; "Eight children, four living." . . . Mrs. Odette Mannchen had scratched her babies' names into the oak headboard she and her husband had hauled behind oxen in a wagon from Missouri. When a child died, she printed "GB" by the name—Gone Before.

But Dillard stumbles when it comes to transporting herself imaginatively into the minds and hearts of those miners, Nooksacks, mothers, et al. Often, instead of giving them distinctive perspectives and vocabularies, she simply lends them her own; thus, at various points, one finds various characters' thoughts and dialogue sounding exactly like the musings of Annie Dillard in such books as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Holy the Firm*. This is especially true of Clare: "The sun is a creature who flits, young Clare Fishburn thought; the sun is a bee. Daylight pried the darkness open and poured in; the whole beach was drunk and reeling on it. . . . Clare was an exuberant, bony boy who loved his world. He often woke exalted, his heart busting in its rib cage, thinking: 'Today is the day!'—but he did not know what day." Likewise, John

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Ireland wonders: "Why were there so many people in the world, living tucked away, so real in their bodies, and so real to themselves?" And: "Overhead the hard stars uttered their gibberish from horizon to horizon. How loose he seemed to himself, under the stars! The spaces between the stars were pores, out of which human meaning evaporated." And so on. (As if one Annie Dillard weren't quite enough!)

For all this rhetoric, then—some of which goes amusingly awry ("Accidents happened, and human bodies were thin-skinned parcels out of which the force of life leaked at a prick")—Dillard largely fails to convey the texture of these lives and the tenor of these people's thoughts. Particularly noticeable is that she doesn't seem to have a clue what it's like to have to work hard, day in and day out, in a natural setting, and not just poke around in it being sensitive; she doesn't seem to understand that a nineteenth-century pioneer struggling to carve a life out of the harsh wilderness might well have a somewhat different view of those trees and rivers and mountains than a late-twentieth-century writer who spends her spare hours wandering in the forest scribbling insights. Contributing to the novel's quintessentially Dillardian preciosity, moreover, is the author's liberal use of quaint period localisms: she refers to Clare's "glad ways," describes a youngster as "a fine broth of a boy," and pronounces the landscape along the Skagit River "almighty fine." To be sure, there are some penetrating and even witty passages here, as when Clare and a stubby U.S. Senator size each other up: "Here were two men who each assumed that the other was intrinsically nobody and who, upon recognizing the assumption in the other, revised their views." Too often, however, like a TV news reporter gratuitously hyping a disaster, Dillard mars potentially forceful passages by employing needless hyperbole, overly elevated diction, and inverted syntax.

In a sense, religion is much in evidence here. Dillard proffers plenty of quotations from Scripture; every time a tragedy occurs, someone mentions God. But it eventually becomes clear that Dillard doesn't have a particularly compelling literary vision of the Christian life, doesn't have much to say about the relation of Christian beliefs to the everyday existence of Pacific Northwest pioneers. This is not to say that *The Living* is an awful novel—it is just exceedingly synthetic, a tedious, shapeless act of will by someone who in her earlier books has crowed tirelessly about the supreme role of inspiration in imaginative writing. Reading this book, one is reminded of the fellow in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who tells the narrator that their mutual acquaintance, the flighty, fun-loving girl-about-town Holly Golightly, "is a phony." But, he goes on to say, "[s]he isn't a phony because she's a *real* phony. She believes all this crap she believes." Perhaps this, after all, is the fairest thing to say about Dillard *vis-à-vis* the gruesome combination of tree-hugging, egomania, and sentimental Christianity that makes up this novel's philosophical underpinnings: she's a phony, but she's a *real* phony.

In *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard asks: "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" Speak for yourself, one wants to say: but as it turns out, she's also speaking for Bernard Walsh, the protagonist of David Lodge's droll new novel, *Paradise News*.[4] Bernard, a fortyish virgin, was ordained a Roman Catholic priest but lost his faith and renounced his vows years ago, and now teaches theology at Rummidge University (a fictional Midlands institution that has figured in Lodge's previous novels); remembering his ministry, he describes himself as having served his parishioners as "a kind of travel agent, issuing tickets, insurance, brochures, guaranteeing them ultimate happiness." As the novel opens, he is setting forth on a package tour to Hawaii with his pious, widowed father in order to spend a couple of weeks with the old man's long-estranged

4 *Paradise News*, by David Lodge; Viking, 294 pages, $21.

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sister, Ursula, now a resident of Honolulu. Ursula wants to mend fences because she is dying of cancer, which her doctor attributes to "too much exposure to the sun." The doctor's hypothesis underscores an irony at the book's center: namely, that Hawaii—widely viewed as an earthly paradise where one may escape, for a time, bad weather and the rat race and an awareness of mortality—has its share of nursing homes and cemeteries, a tourist area (Waikiki) that is one of the planet's most densely populated spots, and year-round sunshine that seems life-enhancing but is, in fact, death-dealing.

Lodge, the British critic whose hilarious novels *Changing Places* and *Small World* established him as the reigning master of academic satire, is not the sort of novelist you'd necessarily expect—or *want*—to see taking on the transcendent. Not that one recognizes immediately that Lodge *is* taking on the transcendent. At first, indeed, *Paradise News* reads like nothing so much as a lightly disguised academic satire. Yolande, a Honolulu psychotherapist who runs Mr. Walsh down with her car and becomes Bernard's love interest, is the estranged wife of a University of Hawaii geography professor; and Bernard's fellow tour-group member Roger Sheldrake is an anthropologist specializing in "tourism studies" (and is, one might add, a fast-lane academic hustler of the sort Lodge has depicted hilariously, in previous novels, in the person of Morris Zapp). When Bernard and Sheldrake first meet at Heathrow, their conversation sounds like the sort one might overhear in an English-department faculty lounge. Sheldrake contends that "tourism is the new world religion" and that "people . . . aren't really enjoying themselves when they go on holiday, but engaging in a superstitious ritual. It's no coincidence that tourism arose just as religion went into decline. It's the new opium of the people, and must be exposed as such." Glib and trendy-sounding though this argument may be, Lodge doesn't seem to find it completely absurd; on the contrary, even as he offers this and other disquisitions by Sheldrake up for our amusement, Lodge seems almost to be using him, in part, as a mouthpiece for his own observations. For instance:

> The pool [at a resort hotel] . . . is not really designed for swimming. It is small, and irregularly shaped, discouraging the swimming of orderly lengths; in fact it is impossible to swim more than a few strokes without bumping into the sides of the pool or into another bather. The pool is really designed for sitting or lying around, and ordering drinks at. Since the patrons are deterred from swimming for long, they get extremely hot and thirsty, and order a lot of drinks, which come with complimentary salted nuts designed to make them even thirstier and therefore order more drinks. But the pool, however minimal, is a *sine qua non*, the heart of the ritual. Most of the sunbathers take at least a perfunctory dip. It is not so much swimming as immersion. A kind of baptism.

When Lodge isn't following Bernard's adventures or quoting Sheldrake's theories, he is keeping us up to date on the activities of a half-dozen or so other members of their tour group—a pair of young women in search of eligible bachelors, a bickering honeymoon couple, a middle-aged husband and wife who are determined to record their every move on videotape. At first one suspects that Lodge has chosen to write about such people so that he may take endless cheap shots at middle-class ideas and folkways and, in particular, at the bourgeois notion of a crowded, overbuilt Pacific resort as a heaven on earth. But though he does exercise his wit considerably in this direction—often to admirable comic effect—Hawaii does prove to be, for Bernard as well as for other tour-group members, a place of renewal. By the time he is ready to return home, Bernard has shed his beard and pallor and learned to enjoy life. This is, then, the sort of novel that I suppose one must call "life-affirming," though Lodge would seem to equate the notion of the good life a bit too readily (in this critic's view, anyway) with that of sexual fulfillment.

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As for Lodge's treatment of religion, it is, shall we say, less than entirely laudable. Christian belief is a major theme here, but Lodge loads the dice: the book's two ardent Christians are Mr. Walsh, a man of simple faith, and Ursula, a recent convert who knows next to nothing about her religion. In effect, then, Lodge equates faith with ignorance. Atheism is represented by Bernard, and we are apparently meant to understand that because he is a theologian and ex-priest, he knows about faith from both sides now, and in rejecting Christianity has made an informed choice. But this isn't really the case. Lodge makes it clear that Bernard took holy orders not because he had a powerful attachment to God but because he wanted to escape family responsibilities. This sort of thing happens, of course, but it hardly makes Bernard an authority on what it means to have faith. In his journal, he waxes ironic about Christianity's lack of a logical foundation, and Lodge plainly wants us to take his arguments seriously. But they are thin and familiar ones, and they don't sound very much like those of a man who has experienced and thought deeply about Christian belief.

Lodge is, to put it simply, yet another writer who seems eminently capable of perceptively addressing a wide variety of subjects but who, when he turns to religion, pretty much misses the point. If he had really wanted to draw a fair and provocative picture of the tension between belief and unbelief, he would have done far better to introduce into his cast a wise and learned Christian in contrast with whom the reader might more clearly see what is wanting in Bernard; but then one doubts that Lodge could manage to get inside the head of such a person. And one doubts, too, that he would *want* to: for Lodge pretty much has his mind made up about faith. He wants us to understand that Bernard's attachment to Catholicism throughout his youth and young manhood has kept him in an arrested state of emotional and sexual development; and it is hardly insignificant that when Yolande finally brings him out of his shell, she does so by leading him through the steps of a professional sex-therapy treatment—psychotherapy and its various branches being, of course, the late-twentieth-century equivalent of religion, and emancipation from psychic fetters the contemporary counterpart to salvation.

Yet Lodge doesn't entirely write off the divine. The irony of Bernard's rescue by sex therapy is that the events that make it possible are made to feel providential, an example of God working in his mysterious ways. And the book concludes with these sentences from Unamuno:

> In the most secret recess of the spirit of the man who believes that death will put an end to his personal consciousness and even to his memory forever, in that inner recess, even without his knowing it perhaps, a shadow hovers, a vague shadow lurks, a shadow of a shadow of uncertainty, and while he tells himself: "There is nothing for it but to live this passing life, for there is no other!" at the same time he hears, in this most secret recess, his own doubt murmur: "Who knows? . . ." He is not sure he hears aright, but he hears. Likewise, in some recess of the soul of the true believer who has faith in the future life, a muffled voice, the voice of uncertainty, murmurs in his spirit's ear: "Who knows? . . ." Perhaps these voices are no louder than the buzzing of mosquitoes when the wind roars through the trees in the woods; we scarcely make out the humming, and yet, mingled with the roar of the storm, it can be heard. How, without this uncertainty, could we ever live?

It is a lovely passage. Yet even as one reads it, one finds oneself thinking that *Paradise News* hasn't quite earned such a conclusion. For the truth is that Lodge understands unbelief better than he does belief—takes it more seriously, pays more attention to it. This is the principal weakness of what is otherwise a highly entertaining comic novel about life, love, and leisure on this side of paradise.

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Books

The dynamics of destruction

by Jeffrey Meyers

Jean Stafford (1915-1979) is best known for her crisp style and caustic wit; her physical illnesses, alcoholism, and mental breakdowns; her friendships with the manic poets (Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman) who came to maturity after World War II; her marriages to Robert Lowell and A. J. Liebling; her fierce, withering letters (which ought to be collected and published); and for a few *New Yorker* tales —"A Country Love Story," "The Interior Castle," and "An Influx of Poets"—inspired by the torment inflicted by Lowell.

Stafford was neglected until Ian Hamilton's life of Lowell appeared in 1982—and has been overdone since then. David Roberts's *Jean Stafford* was published in 1988, Charlotte Goodman's more academic *Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart* in 1990. Ann Hulbert, a senior editor of *The New Republic*, now gives us a third biography, *The Interior Castle*,[1] for which she inevitably used the same archive and interviewed the same friends (though she did not see Gertrude Buckman, Schwartz's former wife, whose affair with Lowell led to the break-up of his marriage and who was living in London a few years ago). Hulbert also tells the same story. But her book, appropriately subtitled "Art and Life," emphasizes the writing and seriously neglects the life. It belongs to a recent genre of pseudo-biography (practiced, for example, by William Pritchard) in which literary criticism—lacking a market—is dressed up to resemble authentic biography.

Though this book is studious and measured, intelligent and well-written, it lacks the excitement of Roberts's biography and is not very interesting to read. Its long, digressive, and often tedious analyses of the works interrupt and sometimes replace the most intriguing and dramatic aspects of the life. For example, in her discussion of Stafford's posing naked in art classes while an undergraduate at the University of Colorado, a daring thing to do in that constricted and conventional society, Hulbert shifts from direct experience to the autobiographical heroine of "The Philosophy Lesson." As she laboriously explains: "to stand up on the platform undraped was at once a declaration and a denial of her independent existence in the world of other consciousnesses: she presented herself as an object of others' scrutiny, only to see herself disappear in their subjective renderings of her." Hulbert does not relate this crucial incident—an ambivalent mixture of embarrassment and defiance —to the dangers of self-exposure, a recurrent theme in Stafford's life and writing, or to her terror of teaching classes and giving public lectures.

This book also lacks the vivid details (Stafford's specialty) that bring the subject to life. Hulbert says that Stafford, worried about money, turned out stories for *The*

1 *The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*, by Ann Hulbert; Knopf, 430 pages, $25.

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New Yorker, but does not tell us what they paid; she says that Stafford rented a flat in Chesham Place in London, but does not tell us that it was off fashionable Belgrave Square. When Stafford and Liebling take a long-awaited trip to Samothrace, Hulbert ignores the significance of the voyage and blandly writes: "They seem to have had a very good time, guided around the island by a young Greek with whom they became friends."

There is very little social context in this book, no real sense of what it was like to grow up among the mountains of Boulder, Colorado, and the orchards of Covina, California. Stafford's family and friends, sketchily drawn, remain vague rather than vivid. And her numerous psychiatrists, with their varied and usually unsuccessful treatments, are not defined and distinguished. Hulbert does not explain why it was "a rather exhausting joy" to see Randall Jarrell or why Allen Tate's "girlfriends were legendary." She says that Isak Dinesen "was often cruel about her husband" without mentioning that Bror von Blixen had given her syphilis, and calls Merrill Moore "a friend of Lowell's parents" without noting that the sonneteering psychiatrist had both treated Lowell *and* slept with Lowell's mother. Nor does Hulbert give reasons why —during the most traumatic incident of Stafford's youth—her best friend shot herself in the head.

Stafford's feckless father, the crucial figure in her life, wrote Westerns under the name of Jack Wonder and Ben Delight. After squandering his inheritance in California and forcing his wife to support the family by running a boarding house in Boulder, he became, according to Stafford, a pathetic and deluded failure, hopelessly dedicated to words, "a small poor friendless man, [who] believed he cut quite a figure in the world." Stafford later told her interim second husband, the journalist Oliver Jensen, when attempting to explain their marital problems: "Seeing him again I am amazed that all of us [she had two sisters and a brother who was killed in the war] did not commit suicide in our cradles." And she exclaimed to Lowell, who, both before and during his phases of religious fanaticism, had treated her much more cruelly than John Stafford: "I thought that you were trying to deprive me of all pleasure just as my father had once done when I was a child and out of defiance of my father, I spent the money wildly and I began to drink more and more, still paying *him* back."

Stafford wanted to escape from her father and, after completing a master's thesis on medieval literature, imagined herself as a would-be philologist. In 1936, ignoring the ominous political signs and the nazification of German education, she accepted a German government scholarship to Heidelberg University. She was not attracted to the decadent Germany of Auden and Isherwood. Living amidst the beer-drinking Brownshirts and goose-stepping Storm Troopers, she fell in love with but would not sleep with Robert Hightower (who became a distinguished Harvard Sinologist). Instead, she picked up a case of gonorrhea during a casual encounter, which led to lifelong "female trouble." She never managed to master the German language and was never able to use the Heidelberg experience successfully in her novels.

A Boulder writers' conference in the summer of 1937 fatefully thrust Stafford into the circle of Southern Fugitives that included Ransom, Tate, and their young disciple Robert Lowell. The following year Lowell courted her by smashing his parents' car into a wall. Stafford suffered a fractured skull, nose, and jaw, and massive head injuries. Hulbert, once again transforming direct experience into metaphor, writes: "The damage would never be entirely disguised, and Stafford was soon made to feel she had 'crashed' the civilization of Boston—rudely, not heroically." She does not explain whether Stafford was forgiving or embittered, whether Lowell was remorseful or indifferent. Though Stafford knew he was "an uncouth, neurotic, psychopathic murderer-poet," as well as a literary genius, she

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married him in April 1940. That same year, after her face had been carefullly repaired, Lowell—once again revealing the boorish, berserk, and brutal side of his character—hit her and broke her nose for the second time. None of their friends "paused to consider at all seriously what it might suggest about Lowell and about their marriage"—and neither does Hulbert. Stafford got closest to the core of their destructive dynamics when she declared: "I hated him but he does what I have always needed to have done to me and that is that he dominates me."

Terrorized by Lowell, Stafford became frigid during their marriage. Their sexual relations ended when "Cal" became a Catholic and Stafford (a lapsed convert to the Church of Rome) came under the influence of his religious mania. Sickened by the contrast between his fire-breathing self-righteousness and his total absence of Christian pity and kindness, she wittily (in a passage not quoted by Hulbert) punned on his nickname and alluded to their marital chastity: "I fell in love with Caligula and am living with Calvin. He's become a fanatic. During Lent he starved himself. If he could get his hands on one, he'd be wearing a hair shirt."

Though Lowell had previously expressed his willingness to serve in the war, his religious views led to a conversion to pacifism. The day before he was due to be inducted, he wrote an open letter to President Roosevelt stating his violent objections to the war. Just as Stafford had ignored German politics in the late 1930s, so the high-minded Lowell refused to read newspapers in the early 1940s when he and Jean were isolated with the Tates (who considered the Civil War to be the most influential political event in modern history) on a mountain top in rural Tennessee. After Lowell was sentenced to a year in jail for draft evasion, the always ironic Stafford felt it would take "three years before Cal has recovered from the pleasurable monasticism of the penitentiary."

Stafford, who would grind out cigarettes on the back of her hand, had her first mental breakdown while writing at Yaddo in the summer of 1943. Her astonishing literary success came the following year, at the same time that Lowell's first book of poems appeared, when her first novel, *Boston Adventure*, sold nearly 200,000 copies. With her royalties Stafford bought her dream house at Damariscotta Mills in Maine. There she started to write *The Mountain Lion*, a more symbolic novel, began to drink heavily, and, after Lowell had beaten her up and threatened to kill her, saw her marriage disintegrate in the fall of 1946.

Stafford went on a mad drinking binge and spent a year in the Payne Whitney Clinic on a "psycho-alcoholic cure." With her tongue like an adder's and her heart black with rage, she trembled in the presence of Lowell's hatred and poured out her vitriolic reproach: "I know this, Cal, and the knowledge eats me like an inward animal; there is no thing worse for a woman than to be deprived of her womanliness. . . . I am sick now, and I see no end and I wish, I wish, I wish to die." Feeding on her agony, Lowell wrote "The Mills of the Kavanaughs" as a parable of their marriage. In 1949 he suffered the first of his recurrent, violent, manic attacks and followed her into Payne Whitney. Neither marriage, Catholicism, nor psychiatry could cure either of them.

As she published the ironically titled story "The Healthiest Girl in Town," a writer friend recorded: "people you thought were permanently settled in sanatoria, like Jean Stafford, looked more ravaged and nervous than you had thought possible." But on a trip to London in the summer of 1956, she met and fell in love with the older, Jewish, twice-married, high-living, rotund *New Yorker* reporter A. J. Liebling. He cared for her tenderly and they enjoyed a good sex life. After their marriage in 1959, Stafford, happy at last, virtually gave up writing fiction for the remaining twenty years of her life.

After Liebling's death in 1963, she moved to his country house in East Hampton, Long Island, and went downhill fast. She continued to write acerbic journalism and did some reluctant teaching at Wesleyan,

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Columbia, and Queens College. But she also drank heavily and quarreled with most of her friends. She was greatly relieved by the death of her emotionally oppressive father, at the age of ninety-two, in 1966. Her *Collected Stories*, published in 1969, won the Pulitzer Prize. Her own sharp tongue was stilled by a stroke in 1976, and she died three years later. As a final, ironic rebuff to the intellectuals who had never quite accepted her, she named her uneducated housekeeper as literary executor.

Suffering had been the deepest source of Stafford's inspiration. Her masterpiece, "The Interior Castle," described the reconstruction of her fractured face. Its bitter irony, excruciating surgical detail, and clinical detachment from her own agony ("Now she heard the busy scissors clipping [her nose] cartilage like tough old toenails") was worthy of Kafka. Stafford belongs to the modern tradition of self-destructive women writers—Katherine Mansfield, Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Smart, Edna Millay, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath—who, in Yeats's words, were "forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work." They inevitably chose the work, as all artists must. Though they suffered terribly for their choice, they saw art as their triumphant redemption.

Diderot's puzzles

Denis Diderot
"This Is Not a Story" & Other Stories.
Translated from the French,
with an introduction, by P. N. Furbank.
University of Missouri Press,
166 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Renee Winegarten

Why has this particular moment been chosen to publish in translation five short tales by Denis Diderot, perhaps the most encyclopedic of eighteenth-century French *philosophes*? Journalist, social reformer, pioneer dramatist and original art critic, experimental writer of fiction—to name but a few of the spheres that attracted his endless curiosity and his open, probing intelligence—Diderot can certainly appear as a charmer. We have only to read his fond farewell to his old dressing gown (charitably replaced along with other outworn belongings by the wealthy salon hostess Madame Geoffrin) to be seduced by his wit and amiability. Doubtless, his short stories are not as well known today as they should be. Moreover, his intricate narrative techniques and evasive strategies, together with his candid discussion of sexual conduct, may now be regarded as playfully or artfully "modern."

In much of his fiction, Diderot liked to appear unbuttoned, at his ease, deep in discussion with his characters and his readers—or listeners, as he sometimes called them. That air of informality is the impression he wanted to convey when he was sitting for painters or sculptors. "I am portrayed bareheaded, wearing a dressing gown, . . . my collar is undone, my gaze is distant like that of someone meditating. I am indeed meditating on this canvas, where I am alive, breathing, full of animation . . ." So wrote Diderot to his beloved confidante, Sophie Volland, describing his portrait by Garand.

Many of his likenesses—including the famous busts by Houdon and Pigalle, and the portrait by Michel Van Loo—do appear to have the breath of life. Usually, his mouth is slightly open, as if he were in the act of speaking directly to us, his great eyes half smiling in irony, half shadowed by melancholy. He was dissatisfied, though, with the portrait by Michel Van Loo: "In one day I had a hundred different faces according to the matter that stirred me . . . I have a mask that deceives the artist," he wrote. Something of that mobility and masking pierces through his fictional writings.

Diderot was born in 1713 at Langres, famous for its cutlery. His father was a pious and respected cutler who sent Denis to be educated by the Jesuits—with contrary results. The skeptical young provincial chose to join literary Bohemia in Paris, where he

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eked out a precarious livelihood translating from the English and doing any kind of hack work. He was among the first of the new journalists or intellectuals who tried to live by the pen.

One of the tasks he was offered was a translation of Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*. Diderot had the brilliant idea of producing a great up-to-date French *Encyclopédie* that would embrace every field of knowledge. As he memorably expressed it: "We must examine everything, stir up everything without exception or circumspection. We must quash all those old idiocies, overturn the barriers that reason may not have established, restore to sciences and arts a freedom that is so dear to them." This daring challenge to remove the blinkers of preconceived ideas and systems—whatever excesses it may have prompted by the way—echoes down the ages as one of the highpoints of the untrammeled inquiring mind. At first Diderot shared his Herculean task with d'Alembert, commissioning his gifted friends (who then included Jean-Jacques Rousseau) to contribute articles to the vast enterprise. It was to make him many enemies.

Diderot's *Lettre sur les Aveugles* (*Letter on the Blind*) served, in 1749, as a pretext for confining him in the dungeons of Vincennes. This work ventured to suggest that the blind may well differ from the sighted in their view of conventional morality and of the divine plan. Irreligion and undermining the good order of the State were crimes virtually synonymous at a time when blasphemy was a capital offense (witness, some seventeen years later, the young Chevalier de La Barre, condemned to have his tongue torn out and to be beheaded for "insulting" a crucifix).

In the dungeons, Diderot went to pieces. After denying that he had written the *Letter on the Blind* and other works patently his, he yielded to his interrogator. He promised "to write nothing in the future without having submitted it to your judgment," even offering to give him secretly the names of booksellers and printers. As the man of honor Diderot claimed to be, doubtless he was to agonize over this conduct. It may go some way to explain why a number of his most brilliant and provocative works of fiction, including *La Religieuse* (*Memoirs of a Nun*), *Le Neveu de Rameau* (*Rameau's Nephew*), and *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître* (*Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*), as well as his equivocal stories, did not appear in print in France during his lifetime.

Five remarkable stories are now elegantly translated and helpfully presented by P. N. Furbank, the distinguished biographer of E. M. Forster and Italo Svevo. Unlike *Rameau's Nephew*, these stories may not quite "explode like a bomb," as Goethe declared when speaking of that work, but they do share many of the same ethical preoccupations and disconcerting techniques. Their author is by no means averse to including in a tale a discussion on his predecessors and on the nature of fiction itself.

Diderot's story-telling style reminds us that he was a dramatist *manqué*. He had tried to produce a kind of highly moral bourgeois drama that would be closer to the manners and (ideal) morals of people of his own day than to those of royal and princely personages in seventeenth-century tragedy. His own plays proved largely unsuccessful on the boards but his theories were to influence the movement toward greater dramatic realism. It was the masterly natural flow of dramatic dialogue that Diderot carried into *Rameau's Nephew* and *Jacques the Fatalist* as well as into his stories. This enabled him to present—in a playful manner—the dramatic confrontation of challenging attitudes and conflicting standpoints. In his tales, he dramatized such divergent views while declining to resolve the argument in a direct way. The reader is left to ponder on a dilemma, paradox, or conundrum.

What does the title "This Is Not a Story" mean precisely? Does it mean that this is not a piece of fiction, that on the contrary it is "true"? In that case it would merely be trying to convince us, as many fictional works do, that we are being offered something that really happened. A similar phrase

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is to be found in *Jacques the Fatalist*, where we are frequently reminded that "this is not a novel." Or does the title imply that here is no story of a conventional or traditional sort such as we might have been expecting? The mixture of real and invented personages and events adds to the puzzle.

In "This Is Not a Story" the reader is plunged into a heated dialogue between the teller of the tale and "a personage who plays as it were the role of listener," as Diderot calls him. The listener keeps interrupting to humorous effect, somewhat in the style of the amusing interruptions in *Jacques the Fatalist* which ceaselessly postpone the account of Jacques's love life. The story itself takes the form of a diptych on the right judgment of human conduct, the theme that runs through each one of the tales. In the first panel, the self-seeking Madame Reymer destroys her self-sacrificing lover, Tanié. In the second panel, two persons who actually existed are strikingly portrayed: the talented Mademoiselle de La Chaux learns Greek and Hebrew to help her lover, the ambitious and ungrateful Gardeil, who discards her. She, who had financed his rise, is reduced to ending her days in poverty. In one panel it is the woman who acts as destroyer, in the other the man. Obliquely, the story that is not a story invites the reader to examine the accepted behavior of the day or of every day.

In a letter, Diderot indignantly condemned the hypocrisy of the double standard as revealed in the conduct of a certain libertine who, despite having seduced and "ruined" a young girl, continued to be welcomed in society and to hold forth on vice and virtue. It was like Diderot to find some justification for the wronged woman who (in a celebrated episode in *Jacques the Fatalist*) took revenge on her faithless lover by coldly plotting his marriage to a prostitute. However, in "On the Inconsistency of Public Opinion Regarding Our Private Actions" (otherwise known as "Madame de La Carlière"), Diderot tried to temper the fault of the Chevalier Desroches, the erring husband whose wife, the former Madame de La Carlière, publicly denounced and shamed him for his lapse into infidelity, and then died of grief, a bizarre heroine. (It is well known that Diderot and his wife did not see eye to eye, and that he was no paragon of marital fidelity.) In assessing the conduct of husband and wife, public opinion is shown in the story to be fickle and ill-founded.

Diderot was proposing the relativity of moral judgments in his fiction. He evoked the difference of interests as well as the odd and sometimes self-destructive nature of human beings. What he sought was to undermine the reader's prejudices and certainties. It was not theological vice and virtue so much as doing good and doing ill that concerned him. Here, it is possible to see an attempt to challenge not only the teachings of the Church but also ecclesiastical abuses, so evident in his disturbing novel *Memoirs of a Nun*, where a young girl who was forced to take the veil recounts her sufferings. (That this kind of cruel compulsion was by no means out of the ordinary can be seen from contemporary memoirs.)

The question of doing good or ill, as opposed to blinkered attitudes among the clergy and the *bien-pensants*, is raised in the fable of "The Two Friends from Bourbonne." Olivier and Félix, cousins of humble birth, are outlaws who display unswerving friendship and loyalty as well as "the inarticulate accent of passion" that Diderot thought so desirable on the stage. Olivier succeeds in rescuing Félix from the gallows but is slain in the process. Félix, heartbroken but unspeaking, spends the remainder of his days providing for Olivier's wife and family and various other dependents. The parish priest, outraged by Félix's lack of piety, takes no account of such good deeds. After Félix's death, Olivier's surviving dependents are not regarded as "the right poor," that is, the obedient churchgoing poor, and therefore do not merit charity: on one hand, outside the Church no salvation, on the other a purely human active compassion.

There is here an echo of Diderot's arguments with his younger brother, abbé Didier-Pierre, arguments that recur in

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"Conversation of a Father with His Children." This fascinating piece is set in the house of Diderot's father in Langres. The conversation between Diderot's father, his sons (or "Myself" and "the abbé"), and his daughter is constantly being interrupted and enlarged by various callers. It turns upon an ethical dilemma of the sort dear to Diderot's heart: whether it can be right to rise above the laws in order to solace the poor and correct a crying injustice. Where kindly, devout Diderot *père*, after much heart-searching, is content to rest upon the pillow of religion and law, Diderot's subversive *alter ego* called "Myself" is inclined to risk all to do good and right wrongs. Reasons, instances are adduced, but no totally satisfying answer is vouchsafed.

Diderot was outraged by injustice: he told Sophie Volland that "[t]he spectacle of injustice sometimes sends me into such transports of indignation that I lose my judgment, and in this delirium, I could kill . . ." That progress from compassion to indignation and murder, evoked by Diderot as it were in idea, finds expression in the interpolated anecdote concerning the cobbler of Messina, who takes the law into his own hands to redress the wrongs of the "oppressed citizenry." Diderot, too, could envisage regeneration through a blood bath. He had no time for human beings who lacked passion. Indeed, he called himself an "apologist of strong passions," preceding Stendhal in an inclination to find sublimity in great crimes and the deployment of energy.

The figure called "Myself" in Diderot's fiction is not always consistent. The moral standpoint of "Myself," the decent *philosophe* who affects to be shocked by the amoral bohemianism of "Himself," Rameau's endlessly astonishing parasitical nephew, might suggest that the two are irreconcilable contraries. Yet there is more than a hint of Diderot's insecure early Parisian days as a literary hack in some aspects of the stance of Rameau's multifaceted nephew, who is intelligent enough to realize that his gifts, though considerable, do not rise to the genius of his uncle the composer. Moralism and amoralism are twin voices in Diderot, in a debate that has no ready solution in his work.

In this regard, the "Supplement to Bougainville's *Voyage*" is especially telling. It offers a fictional elaboration of themes suggested by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's account of his voyage round the world from 1766 to 1769, and in particular the description of sexual freedom in Tahiti—"the Tahiti fable." Diderot's sardonic fiction consists of a series of conversations between A and B, between the naval Chaplain and the Tahitian Orou, and a powerful monologue entitled "The Old Man's Farewell." In this eloquent monologue, the old Tahitian or "Noble Savage" curses the advent of "those wicked and ambitious men" who betray "a savage soul," and who will corrupt his compatriots and destroy the Tahitian way of life, based on "the pure instinct of nature."

The subtitle of the "Supplement" runs: "On the Inconvenience of Attaching Moral Ideas to Certain Physical Actions Which Do Not Admit of Them," that is, to sexual conduct. It will be noted that Diderot discreetly uses the word "inconvenience," not "error." The Tahitians cannot comprehend the religious beliefs held by the Chaplain and the life of chastity that these beliefs demand of him. The Chaplain's virile instincts eventually overcome his religious principles and vows, so that—to oblige his host—he sleeps with each of the Tahitian's proffered daughters in turn. In the Tahitian view, all such restrictions run counter to human nature. The manners of the Tahitians are rooted in principles utterly opposed to those of the French or of "civilized" society. They do not value monogamy or exalt lifelong fidelity, and they regard children (whatever their paternity) as a woman's dowry. Their standards of judgment are public good and private utility as opposed to a hypocritical parade of virtue. To them, as they echo a familiar theme of Diderot's, their guests are nothing but hypocrites.

However, in taking the Tahitians' in-

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stinctual mode of life to the extreme, Diderot is hardly expecting it to be imitated in France. He is using it to highlight the shortcomings and inconsistencies of sophisticated behavior. Tahitian life may appear to be happy, but it is essentially unenlightened and mediocre, and that is not likely to appeal to the inquiring Diderot, the advocate of strong passions.

And what are we to make of the concluding—if inconclusive—interchange between A and B as they return to characters or personages of "This Is Not a Story" and "On the Inconsistency of Public Opinion . . ."? In sophisticated society, A and B decide, one can count upon finding cruel people like Madame Reymer and Gardeil, as well as victims like Tanié and Mademoiselle de La Chaux, the Chevalier Desroches and Madame de La Carlière. "So what shall we do? Are we to go back to Nature?" asks A. "What we must do is to speak against insane laws until they are reformed," B replies, "but in the meantime to obey them." That seems at once a bold and a cautious response.

What is missing from any straightforward account of the sallies, evasions, ironic veerings to and fro of the arguments in Diderot's tales is his sense of fun. That gaiety in the discussion of grave issues is infectious. "It is not possible to be more profound and more crazy," wrote Diderot to Sophie Volland about his *Le Réve de d'Alembert* (*d'Alembert's Dream*). He liked to link absurdity and depth, telling her that he would prefer people to say of his writing something like "this is not so mad as to be unbelievable" instead of "here are words of wisdom."

Yet clearly gaiety is not the whole story. Diderot particularly admired in Samuel Richardson the novelist's psychological acumen, the way the author of *Clarissa* "carries a torch into the depths of the cave. It is he who teaches us to discern the subtle and dishonest motives hidden beneath other, honest motives which are quick to show themselves first." Diderot's sense of something dark lurking behind the masks presented to society is scarcely surprising in a man who, according to Rousseau, was subject to "black moods." (Small wonder that Diderot's insights would attract the attention not only of Goethe but of Hegel, Marx, and Freud.) Diderot also lauded Richardson for having made that egregious libertine, Lovelace, "a scoundrel you hate, love, admire, scorn, who astonishes you in whatever guise he appears and who is never for a moment the same." Something of that astounding mélange is to be found in Diderot's writings too, expressed in his own inimitable freewheeling manner.

Diderot was quite conscious of his strengths in fields other than fiction. Of his comments on the paintings displayed in the *Salon* of 1765, he told Sophie Volland, "However you look at it, this is certainly the best thing I have done since I have been cultivating literature, for the diversity of styles, the variety of subjects, and the abundance of ideas which, I imagine, have never crossed another mind but my own." It is hard to resist that lack of false modesty. He, who was to welcome the advent of the young Jacques-Louis David, urged painters: "Move me, astonish me . . ." That is what Diderot himself never ceases to do.

Nasty & nice

Auberon Waugh Will This Do?
The First Fifty Years of Auberon Waugh.
Century, 280 pages, £15.99

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Though relatively unknown in this country, Auberon Waugh has enjoyed a long and prolific career as one of England's most consistently opinionated, confrontational, and bumptious journalists. Since 1986, Waugh has been editor of the *Literary Review*, and he has also acted as political columnist on *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman*, *The Daily Mail*, and, less reputably, on the Murdoch tabloid publications *News of the World* and

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Sun. His most notable contributions to political journalism have been his "Diaries" in *Private Eye*, which appeared regularly in that satire sheet from 1972 to 1986. In *Private Eye* Waugh was given editorial license to be scathing and scatological, not only to his natural enemies on the Left but even to his allies on the Right—a license Waugh enjoyed to the full, finding that he had almost exhausted the possibilities of venom in the process: "the great problem," he writes, "was always to find enough people I wished to be rude about."

In recent years his work has begun to appear in a few American publications such as *Vanity Fair* and *Harper's*, but there is no denying that Waugh's brand of satire does not travel well. He has said that *Will This Do?*, his recent autobiography, has so far failed to find an American publisher purely because of its provocatively un-PC attitudes, but a more likely reason is that, among New York book editors, his work is thought "too British" for U.S. consumption: Waugh is best known as a critic of parliamentary politics, not only the principles behind these politics but the personalities and eccentricities of particular cabinet ministers and MPs, most of whom are unknown in this country. Add to this the fact that *Private Eye* exults in in-jokes, obscure references, and nicknames whose origins even their inventors have forgotten, and it is easy to see why so much of Waugh's writing is impenetrable to the uninitiated. Waugh is himself aware of the ephemeral nature of his work even on its native soil. About his books (which include several novels) he writes that "the only one which I would claim as my masterpiece, the second volume of *Eye* Diaries, . . . will so far fail [Cyril] Connolly's thirty-year test as to be incomprehensible." On top of all this one must take into account that one of Waugh's favorite sports is America-bashing, a well-worn genre to which he has added little that is either original or amusing.

So it is that, until lately, American readers have not had much opportunity to read Waugh's work. It is especially unfortunate that *Will This Do?* has not yet found an American publisher, for here, for the first time, Waugh has produced a work of broad general interest. The book is also surprisingly, disarmingly *good-spirited*. Can this equable and tolerant narrator really be the old familiar ogre? It is hard to believe, until one recollects that Waugh *père* and *grand-père* were both past masters of role-playing (or self-fashioning, to use the sort of trendy jargon that Waugh *fils* most despises). As Evelyn Waugh's biographer Martin Stannard points out, "both were themselves manifestations of the Great British Eccentric, Arthur a Dickensian, Evelyn a Wodehouse figure." The ferocity and intolerance of the Auberon Waugh we all know might just possibly be something of a pose, if we are to believe in the reality of the unexpectedly pleasant figure that emerges from this narrative. This should not come as a complete surprise when one considers that so ruthless an attacker as the public Waugh could never be so widely tolerated, even liked, as he unquestionably is. Indeed, I have been informed by one of his former deputy editors that she has never known a kinder or more thoughtful employer.

The tone of this memoir is resolutely mellow, as though Waugh were in some manner offering an apology for the curmudgeonly persona he has so long and assiduously cultivated. The subtitle of the book—"The First Fifty Years of Auberon Waugh"—provides a rationale for this. The climacteric of the half-century has made Waugh's lifetime role as *enfant terrible* rather unseemly; he now attempts the transition into a cheerful old-fogeydom, an easier change than one might think, for unlike many *enfants terribles* Waugh is no social outsider. He has always aimed his pot-shots from within the camp: he is, not only by birth, but by inclination and position, a firmly ensconced member of the establishment he mocks, hardly rebellious in any real sense of the word. He himself admits it. "Other journalists . . . seem to live in a perpetual state of indignation, but practically nothing made me genuinely indignant." It now appears that what had seemed to be indignation in

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so many of his columns was actually only gleeful contrariety.

It is inevitable that a good deal of the interest aroused by this book will stem from general curiosity about Evelyn Waugh. The younger Waugh is by no means a deeply reflective thinker or writer. But when discussing his rather terrifying father, he comes as close to analytical thought as he ever does.

> The presence, as I say, was overwhelming. He was a small man—scarcely five foot six in his socks—and only a writer, after all, but I have seen generals and chancellors of the exchequer, six foot six and exuding self-importance from every pore, quail in front of him. When he laughed, everyone laughed, when he was downcast, everyone tiptoed around trying to make as little noise as possible. It was not wealth or power which created this effect, merely the force of his personality. I do not see how he could have been pleased by the effect he produced on other people. In fact he spent his life seeking out men and women who were not frightened of him. Even then, he usually ended up getting drunk with them, as a way out of the abominable problem of human relations.

Needless to say, the father-son relationship was problematic, and this is evident in the son's sad inability simply to use the words "Father" or "Papa" when writing about the father. "Evelyn? Unthinkable. Papa? Too sentimental. Waugh? I did not dare. The problem remains unresolved." That this self-consciousness in the relationship continues, twenty-odd years after the elder Waugh's death, is evidence of the crippling effect that the father exerted upon the son, an effect that is openly acknowledged. Auberon Waugh admits that "the strain of living two lives, one on my own, the other through his eyes, was greatly relieved by his sudden death. . . . Whenever I have doubts, it is my father's fury rather than Divine retribution which I dread."

Hardly a model boy, the young Auberon provoked that fury at regular intervals. But what would have seemed simple peccadillos to an ordinary father occasioned from Evelyn Waugh terrible judgments upon his son's character and sense of honor, judgments that often colored his dealings with the boy for years after the trifling misdeeds had been committed. But even as a child Auberon seems to have had the self-assurance and emotional sophistication to assess his father's own moral limitations and not to let himself be defeated by this chilling detachment.

Waugh dwells upon his parents' apparent coldness and indifference with a mixture of horror and admiration, concluding on balance that the treatment was not entirely unbeneficial.

> Some may decide that their lack of concern sprang from indifference, and there may be an element of truth in that—they had five other perfectly good children, after all. But I would like to think that there was a streak of committed libertarianism in their make-up which harmonized with their natural inclinations toward indifference.

He also lauds their principle of encouraging the children's early attempts, however lame, at wit and imagination. It is an undeniable fact that Auberon Waugh did not inherit his father's genius for black comedy and satire. He lacks the essential coldness and whatever else it takes—despair, perhaps, or deep disgust—to count as a satirist of the first rank; his novels, though derivative of his father's both in style and subject matter, are lightweight and forgettable, without any real center. But Auberon Waugh did inherit, or develop, his father's lifelong gift for constructing grotesque and sinister fantasies around perfectly innocuous persons or situations. It is a gift the younger Waugh has embellished into an entire career.

For Auberon Waugh is at his best when indulging in nonsensical and vicious flights of fancy. Choosing his victims capriciously, he hounds them without mercy. When the House of Commons refused to allow Waugh, as *Private Eye* correspondent, into

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the Press Gallery, he began a campaign of personal abuse in the pages of *Private Eye* against the unfortunate sergeant-at-arms who had to enforce the edict. "When a small bomb went off in the Palace of Westminster, he was accused of having farted, he became 'Gay' Gordon-Lennox and a notorious homosexual rapist." The Features Editor who dismissed Waugh from the *Times* fared no better.

> Every year from then on, at the time of the Miss World competition, I claimed to recognize the familiar features of my old friend Charles Douglas-Home behind the tantalizing bikini of Miss Costa Rica. On countless other occasions throughout the years, he was wheeled on as a comic turn. Whenever we met in the course of the next fifteen years or so, he would giggle nervously and edge away as fast as he could.

Waugh also continued, with relish, his father's lifelong persecution of the hapless Cyril Connolly, who in old age as in youth laid himself guilelessly open to mockery and abuse. On the subject of castration, Connolly had written: "there is nothing I dread more than injury to those parts whose activities are still in the private sector and which I regard as the source of so much intellectual authority, lucidity, judgement, and visual pleasure." In answer to this, and to Connolly's claim that he had never masturbated until the age of eighteen, Waugh's comment was: "Visual pleasure indeed. If this horrible old man can't keep his eyes off himself at the age of 70, he might have been better advised to experiment a little earlier like everyone else."

Though Waugh defines his principal gift as that for "making the comment, at any given time, which people least wish to hear," I would have to offer the opinion that his true gift is for schoolboy humor. This is by no means a negligible or unimportant talent, and it is one that is sadly underdeveloped in this country. But, with the exception of a few public issues about which he feels genuine passion—his long campaign against the Wilson government for its role in the Nigerian blockade of Biafra, for example —Waugh sticks to this form of abuse. He attacks public figures and institutions from the fixed point of a set of personal prejudices rather than from conclusions reached after any deep consideration. His gift is for skimming wittily over the surface of an issue, not for plumbing its depths.

> My grand philosophical conclusion at the end of the day is that humanity does not divide into the rich and the poor, the privileged and the unprivileged, the clever and the stupid, the lucky and the unlucky or even into the happy and the unhappy. It divides into the nasty and the nice. Nasty people are humorless, bitter, self-pitying, resentful and mean. They are also, of course, invariably miserable.

A few of these mean and resentful people might be bold enough to point out that Waugh himself has been known to reveal some traits that might fairly be called nasty. This citation is, unfortunately, typical of Waugh's line of reasoning. The world is divided into Us and Them, and that's that. His unwillingness to go beyond this simple formulation limits much of his writing —witty, vivid, frighteningly facile—to the function of being not so much provocative as merely provoking.

But there is an honorable place for the professional gadfly in our civilization, and Waugh fills the position well. To him, every public person becomes fair game the moment he becomes an institution—the very freehandedness of Waugh's abuse is refreshing. Newspapers like *Private Eye* serve a vital function in cleansing public life of its pieties and its self-mythologizing. And Waugh has also earned himself a modest position in the literary firmament for his many years of fighting the good fight against the ludicrous libel laws that have long been menacing journalism in Britain.

Will This Do? will please Waugh-admirers and disarm those who have so far found his work less than hilarious. Good-natured,

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reasonably evenhanded, informative about British political journalism and about Waugh's own rather strange family, the book is definitely a good read and would raise surprisingly few hackles in this country —should it be lucky enough to find a publisher.

Fuss & featherweights

John W. Aldridge
Talents & Technicians: Literary Chic & the New Assembly-Line Fiction.
Scribner's, 162 pages, $18

reviewed by James Bowman

John Aldridge says in the preface to this book that "the first responsibility of the critic is to function as a monitor of taste, to challenge fashionable opinion," and throughout it he remains true to that conception of the critic's function. The result is a useful if not very original dissection of the gutless fiction of the minimalist and Brat-Pack schools and of the invariably dreary products of university "creative writing" courses. Aldridge's heroes, and therefore the setters of the standards of taste by which he judges these younger writers, are Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Much as I sympathize with his outrage at the literary pretensions of novelists like Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Ann Beattie, it does not seem altogether fair to me to criticize them for not being Norman Mailer or Kurt Vonnegut. On the contrary, this is one thing to be said in their favor. I also found myself wishing for a few more examples of what it is that he is criticizing. His constantly reiterated point about the modern American fiction that he doesn't like is that it is featureless: all its practitioners seem to write in similar, almost interchangeable styles. Thus he may have supposed that selected quotations would inevitably be a misrepresentation of it and suggest a degree of character that it does not possess.

He's got a point. It takes very little acquaintance with what publishers and publicists seem to consider the distinguished fiction of our time to make us want to go out of our way not to have to read even excerpts of their work. But someone who sets himself up as a critic of novelists has got to grapple with the texture of their prose as well as its content. Apart from a couple of samples drawn from Ann Beattie and T. Coraghessan Boyle, it is not until near the end, when he comes to treat McInerney and Ellis, that he offers any extended quotation. And the flat and featureless writing of such high-concept, low-density *romanciers* as McInerney and Ellis is singularly unhelpful. Can all the young novelists be this bad?

The answer is no. Aldridge has a lot of time for Don DeLillo and William Gaddis and even has some nice things to day about T. Coraghessan Boyle, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lorrie Moore, and others whom he identifies as good writers but, in varying degrees, lacking in "significance." This favorite word seems to mean not only the capacity of stories about individuals to resonate with universal meanings—a capacity which it is entirely legitimate to censure any work of art for not having—but also the political and moral content that Aldridge himself seems to think of as the touchstone of greatness. Here is where I begin to be doubtful.

For if he is good on the emptiness of the modern novel, he is on less safe ground when he comes to his own prescription for what it should be filled with. About William Kennedy, for instance, he says that "behind these portraits of profound human misery there is no evident reformist zeal, no anger at the social system in part responsible for them, and no suggestion that the portraits are intended to exemplify something larger than themselves." Similar comments are made about most of the other writers he criticizes. Jay McInerney's characters are compared to those of Scott Fitzgerald and J. D. Salinger, except that, in *Bright Lights, Big City*, there is "no Holden Caulfield to raise the question of the phoniness of their way of life, no Amory Blaine to assess the

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destructive potential of the values of promiscuous consumership on which it is based."

I wonder if Aldridge has the right target in his sights. He wants fiction to instruct, to pass judgment on society or on people, but for me it is a nice question how far this is even possible in fiction anymore. In a way this is precisely the point of the writers he so sternly censures: who are you, who am I, and who, above all, is John W. Aldridge to lay down the moral law? It is precisely the moral framework which has disappeared from public discourse in America, the land of doing one's own thing, and that is not to be reconstructed by some novelist preaching at us, or some critic preaching at the novelist for not preaching at us. Novelists must take the world as they find it and record what they see. And to take contemporary moral nullity as one's subject is not to be oneself either morally null or a bad novelist.

Or it ought not to be. The fact that there are so many bad novelists about, however, may not be coincidental. It seems to me that Aldridge identifies the real problem in his last chapter, where he speculates on what would have happened to *An American Tragedy* if Roberta Alden could have had an abortion:

> What would have happened to Raskolnikov if he had had access to psychiatric help, or to Emma Bovary if she could have had a divorce, or to Stephen Dedalus if he had been able to escape Ireland and get a Fulbright fellowship to travel to Norway and study his beloved Ibsen in the original? . . . Today there is a strong possibility that all these characters would be speedily drained of their individuality and dramatic value and turned into featureless statistical increments of some collective social dilemma. Emma would undoubtedly be swallowed up in the movement against the male oppression of women; Raskolnikov would be seen as a victim of a disadvantaged childhood; while Stephen would become an example of what happens to a person when he is differently abled, a poet among priests, in a society rife with religious authoritarian elitism.

When the moral content is drained out of life and human emotion becomes a mere indication of some social pathology is it any wonder that the literary enterprise throws up such inverse moralists as Jay McInerney or Bret Easton Ellis—novelists chiefly remarkable for what they leave out?

The temptation is to suppose that it is impossible to hope for any fiction either more readable or more morally coherent than that of those two writers. I don't think it is, but I also don't think that our salvation lies in finding a young Norman Mailer. One of the problems with Aldridge's high-minded conception of the critic's métier is that it too often leads him to criticize authors not for what they are but for what they are not. Even before the critic's function as arbiter of taste there is his real "first responsibility" —to *read*. It is in order that we may know he has done so that quotation is so important. And you must read very carefully to find the real hopes of American fiction.

Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons*, for example, is criticized for not being satirical. It so happens that Anne Tyler does not write satire. Lots of good writers don't, after all, and it is hardly her fault that she has not produced to J. W. Aldridge's order a "devastating dissection of a certain type of motherly woman who, in her desire for control over other people's lives, is something of a monster." Anyone who has read *Breathing Lessons* and imagines that Maggie Moran is "something of a monster"—or, even worse, a sort of failed monster—is simply not reading carefully enough. Anne Tyler is one of the few first-rate American novelists of our time, but, alas for John Aldridge, she has not created the character he expected her to create and so he misses her.

Shorter notices

Robb Forman Dew Fortunate Lives. Morrow, 285 pages, $20

Robb Forman Dew is a slow worker. *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*, her widely praised first

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novel, was published in 1981; *Fortunate Lives*, her third novel, has just appeared. Dew's output may be small, but it is of high quality, and *Fortunate Lives*, like its predecessors, is absolutely first-rate.

Fortunate Lives is about the Howells family, first seen in *Dale Loves Sophie to Death.* Much has happened in the troubled decade that separates the two books. Martin Howells, professor at a small New England college and editor of a little magazine, and Dinah, his slightly obsessive homecoming-queen wife, are still trying to come to terms with the senseless death of Toby, their second child, who was killed six years ago in an automobile accident; David, Toby's older brother, is about to go off to Harvard, and *Fortunate Lives* is the story of, among other things, his last summer at home. Despite its academic setting and wry touches of attendant sexual melodrama, *Fortunate Lives* is in no way an "academic novel," just as its author is no satirist. Nor has Dew's impeccable Southern-writer pedigree (she is John Crowe Ransom's granddaughter and Robert Penn Warren's goddaughter) given her any noticeable inclination toward the gothic or the grotesque. She prefers to plumb the emotional intricacies of everyday family life, and beneath the surface irony of her title lies the passionately held conviction that domestic love is a force of primal strength and abiding importance, man's only real shelter from the harsh sorrows of this world.

All three of Dew's novels deal with this traditionally "womanly" theme, and she is in many ways a distinctly womanly author. She has a Colette-like receptivity to the quotidian pleasures of the physical world, coupled with a tender yet unsentimental lyricism that is very much her own. ("Dinah was able to walk up and down the stairs of her house, and in and out of the rooms, and think of it as a spare, clean, crisp apple of a place—a perfect thing.") Moreover, neither Dinah Howells nor her creator evinces the slightest interest in the great world of ideas, a refreshing trait that no less an authority than Rebecca West regarded as quintessentially feminine. If Dew has any strongly held views on anything other than the transcendent power of married love and the value of writing really well, no trace of them are to be found in her novels. But to speak therefore of her work as "womanly" is in no way to diminish its underlying concerns, or the grace and intelligence with which those concerns are so compellingly dramatized in *Fortunate Lives.*

Given her fastidious style, narrowness of subject matter, and unhurried working habits, one is tempted to suggest that Robb Forman Dew aspires to be the J. F. Powers of the nuclear family. That's a modest enough goal, but I can't imagine a worthier one, or an American novelist better equipped to achieve it.

—*Terry Teachout*

Marianne McDonald
Ancient Sun, Modern Light:
Greek Drama on the Modern Stage.
Columbia University Press, 239 pages, $35

Ancient Sun, Modern Light is a curious record of recent attempts by a number of theater companies to update, in performance, Greek drama. Marianne McDonald, of the Department of Theater at the University of California, San Diego, begins her book with a report on Japanese dramaturge Suzuki Tadashi's triple bill of *The Trojan Women*, *Clytemnestra*, and *The Bacchae* as performed at the Los Angeles Olympics Art Festival in 1984. With a Kabuki flavor, *The Trojan Women* paralleled Troy as Greece's victim with Japan "as America's victim. The degradation of Japan by America during [!] and following World War II . . . insidious imposition of American culture . . . banal popular song . . . vulgarity and bland technological homogeneity . . . the destruction of art and taste." In the Noh-flavored *Clytemnestra* (the text was a Suzuki pastiche), "Clytemnestra stabs her children as they are locked in an incestuous embrace." This showed "the position of women in modern Japan." In the *Bacchae* Dionysus dismem-

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bered Pentheus "just as the Japanese cartels are dismembering American industry." "The Japanese," we are to gather, "make an attempt to understand the 'other,'" whilst the West does not bother to reciprocate.

Next, Peter Sellars staged Robert Auletta's version of Sophocles' *Ajax* at La Jolla in 1986. It was set at the Pentagon. Ajax was a Sioux, who had earlier raped Athena—an act at once "sexist and racist (Athena is played by a black woman)." Ajax's wife, Tecmessa, was a Latin woman, from a leftist country just savaged by the United States. Odysseus was CIA. Agamemnon and Menelaus were five-star generals. Athena masturbated with a microphone. Connoisseurs of Sellars can only weep at not having been in La Jolla.

Then there was a *Medea* by East German playwright Heiner Müller in which "Jason the capitalist exploits Medea the worker," and an adaptation of the *Oresteia* by Irish playwright Thomas Murphy in which the Catholic Church "is shown to be more interested in its own power than in humanity's suffering."

Tony Harrison's *Trackers*, based on a Sophocles satyr play, sounds more interesting than the other productions described by Miss McDonald. In Harrison, the papyrologists and "fellaheen" who dug up the papyrus containing *The Trackers* switch identities with the mad Apollo and the lewd satyrs. Mr. Harrison has his scholar/god speak Oxford and his satyrs "the language of the folk," i.e., of Leeds, where he comes from. The play, which was given its première at Delphi and was tranferred to London, sounds clever in concept, if a bit crude in execution, to judge from the excerpts cited here.

It will have been gathered that Miss McDonald discusses these productions in no critical spirit. Far from it. Dithyrambic rapture greets all her subjects; all her swans are Zeuses. And the gushy tone is not confined to her critical prose. Four whole chapters are taken up by either fawning interviews with the maestros or verbatim transcriptions of "talks" given by them. My favorite is Peter Sellars holding forth in Austria in 1989 at a conference on Ancient Greek drama about the aphasic terror gripping America: "Mr. Reagan was the first president to have fewer than four press conferences, and at these press conferences he would only answer questions from correspondents wearing red ties." Cloudcuckooland, indeed.

How dismal that Columbia University Press should publish this ill-written and confused fan magazine of a book that swallows with a smile every drop of political attitudinizing and theatrical gimmickry from the harebrained Left. Two reflections: what a dry time it has been for rethinkings of Greek drama as compared to, say, the decade 1935-45, which saw Giradoux's *Tiger at the Gates*, Anouilh's *Antigone*, and Sartre's *The Flies*. And finally, there *is* a great theatrical company, Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soliel in Paris, that is currently staging the *Oresteia* under the title *Les Atrides*. It is at once a close and reverent version and a profound and beautiful resurrection of Aeschylus. And although the politics of the troupe might perhaps be congenial to Miss McDonald, they are not worn onstage and are not the point of the art they make. Not surprisingly, Miss McDonald mentions the Théâtre du Soleil but once, and then only to dismiss it and misspell it.

—*Donald Lyons*

James Longenbach Wallace Stevens:
The Plain Sense of Things.
Oxford University Press, 342 pages, $18.95

"Many readers of Wallace Stevens," notes the jacket copy of James Longenbach's second book, "wonder at his 'double' life: the poet, crafting phrases of supernal elegance and beauty, and the lawyer and insurance executive, wading through life's utilitarian chores with practical aplomb. For more than one critical generation it has seemed as if these two men were unacquainted. . . . [But this notion] is misleading. . . . Stevens was not only aware of the momentous events taking place around him,

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but often his poetry was inspired by those events. . . . [H]e. . . thought deeply about the strengths—and, equally important, the limitations—of poetry as a social product and force."

This thesis is presented as revolutionary; but it's hardly that. For who would argue that Stevens's two "halves" were unacquainted, or that he was unaware of the Depression and world wars, or that he didn't think deeply about poetry and society? What matters is that his poems, whether or not inspired by historic events, deal chiefly with abstract ideas and not politics. Longenbach, an associate professor at the University of Rochester, never really denies this, though he does offer his own version of the contemporary line that *not* to make a political statement is to make a political statement; as he puts it, "Stevens's interest in poetic ambiguity" and "his concern with the limitations of the social function of poetry" are "part of a carefully modulated effort to assert the historicity of poetry and the political power of poets." Certainly all his rhetoric, in this chronologically arranged study, about how "Stevens confronted basic political issues daily in his work at the Hartford," how "the Great War helped to shake Stevens into the state of mind that produced 'Sunday Morning,'" and how *Harmonium* was a "product of a postwar historical imperative," makes it sound as if Longenbach's purpose is to reclassify Stevens as a political poet.

Everyone calls Stevens a poet of imagination and reality. Longenbach prefers to invoke other dichotomies: "public and private," "engagement and transcendence," "art and politics," "self and politics," "idealism and realism," "the world within and the world without." His slick blurring of distinctions not only among these dichotomies but also among the various senses of "politics" makes it hard not to feel, at times, that he's trying to overstate the political dimension of Stevens's art. Ultimately, however, Longenbach doesn't seriously misrepresent either Stevens's politics or his verse's political detachment—which would seem to suggest that the aim here is not necessarily to twist Stevens into a political poet but simply to trace his political shifts. But why? For little of what Longenbach has to say on this subject illuminates Stevens's poetry; indeed, Longenbach generally seems to be talking not about the poems but around them.

Among his more notable accomplishments here is that he manages to work in most of the biggest names on the academic hit parade—among them deconstructionists, feminists, and Marxists—and, despite the apparent incompatibility of their approaches, to agree with virtually all of them. (He will be a full professor before he knows it.) One minute he is cheerfully citing Frank Lentricchia on Stevens's "epic of bourgeois interiority"; the next, he is examining Stevens's "patriarchal" assertion of "phallic power" and his "desire to suppress feminine energies." A master of the "on the one hand, on the other hand" approach, he is so quick to qualify every statement, to seek common ground among differing points of view, and to underscore the ambiguities in every situation that he ends up saying almost nothing fresh or surprising. Indeed, what this book essentially amounts to is a poised, professionally prudent restatement of universally accepted ideas by a critic with no conspicuous passions or convictions. Though he makes some solid points, then (for instance, about why Stevens never visited Europe), Longenbach emerges from this study with no clear point of view of his own—in fact, no clear *point* at all.

—*Bruce Bawer*

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Notebook

Underdog & pony show: the Left convenes at Hunter College

by Heather Mac Donald

The role of underdog ought to sit uneasily on the academic Left. Its roaring success in transforming curricula, college admissions and hiring practices, and the language of the humanities testifies to its dominance in such organizations as the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association, and the American Association of University Professors, to its favored status with the giants of educational philanthropy, and to its strength on campuses nationwide.

Yet however incongruous, underdog is the part the Left is determined to play to the academic traditionalists' topdog in the growing public debate over multiculturalism, affirmative action, and "political correctness." A conference this April at Hunter College in New York City served as a private dress rehearsal for the farce we can expect to see enacted in public forums over the coming months. Humorously entitled "Reconstructing Higher Education: Beyond the Academic Culture Wars" (as if the Visigoths were to host a symposium on "Rebuilding Rome"), the conference was organized by the academic Left's new public-relations arms, the Teachers for a Democratic Culture and the more radical Union of Democratic Intellectuals. Its purpose was to give the "proponents of the new scholarship and of institutional reform" an "opportunity to present their side of the story." The most charitable thing one can say about that story in its current version is that it needs work—a lot of it.

The themes of the tale are epic, involving no less than a struggle between democracy and freedom on the one hand, and totalitarianism and repression on the other. Its plot, however, is straightforward. Wahneema Lubiano, assistant professor of English and African-American studies at Princeton and one of the conference's participants, has summed it up nicely: Once upon a time (and still, alas, today) universities served as manufactories for the "reproduc[tion] [of] racism and racists." They excluded women, people of color, and the disadvantaged from their student bodies and faculty by imposing bogus standards of merit; they excluded them from their curricula by appealing to such bogus notions as aesthetic quality and historical significance. Only in the last few years have universities begun to shed their oppressive character and move toward a more democratic practice.

Unfortunately, the story continues, the Right has set out to undermine these recent advances by fomenting racial and ethnic tensions on campuses. It sets students against each other by a spurious linkage of affirmative action, multiculturalism, and "political correctness," and by its campaign to "defund" the public sector. Yet even as the Right cut off access to education during the Eighties, it was pouring big money into its own "ideas industry": think tanks, foundations, and academic journals. According to Ellen Messer-Davidow, a professor of women's studies at the University of Min-

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nesota, the purpose of that industry is to promote cultural conservatism by taking control of higher education. Its method is the manufacture of pseudo-"expert knowledge," which masks "ideology and activism." Behind that edifice of nouveau-expertise lie the interests of corporate capitalism.

There are several problems with this narrative. Leaving aside the question of whether the essential nature of the university is racist, let us focus on the Left's analysis of why the revolution on campus is encountering resistance. To begin with, it is the height of disingenuousness to blame the academic traditionalists for connecting multiculturalism, affirmative action, and "political correctness." No one proclaims the linkage more loudly than the Left itself. It demands multicultural curricular "reform" in response to the increasing diversity of the campus population. That diversity is in turn the goal of the "democratization" of admissions and hiring practices, a.k.a. racial and ethnic quotas. And the protection of these newly incorporated voices of difference requires speech codes to prevent their silencing by oppositional speech. All three policies originate in "identity politics," that recent arrival on the academic scene that promotes race, gender, and sexual preference as qualifications in their own right that transcend traditional standards of merit.

The charge that the tensions on campus result from "defunding" the public sector is equally spurious. Private universities are just as polarized as public ones. A student who feels alienated by the official emphasis on race and ethnicity is not a victim of "defunding." Nor is the student—invoked by one member of the audience—who questions why his black classmates were admitted to Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley, while he was admitted only to a California state school despite his higher grades. Allotting more money to education, while desirable in itself, would not change affirmative action's zero-sum equation that promotes students with poorer academic records over those with better ones. One answer to the disgruntled Cal State student offered by a member of the audience received universal acclamation: "Tell him—it's not the black kid who's taking your place; there should be spots at Berkeley and Stanford for everyone for free." This policy would really do wonders for the quality of higher education, beyond perhaps even the multiculturalists' wildest dreams.

Finally, the allegation that the academic traditionalists constitute a bloated behemoth muscling out the weak and penurious academic Left is laughable. The recent history of higher education is a chronicle of one administrative capitulation after another to the Left's demands for increased funding for multicultural study programs, segregated living arrangements, minority hiring and admissions programs, race-awareness programs, etc.

"Curricular transformation projects" are just one example of the direction of academic and corporate largesse. Deborah Rosenfelt, a professor of women's studies at the Maryland College of Art, told the conference about this increasingly popular method of bringing curricula into line with the multicultural imperative, or, as she put it, of "decentering traditional educational paradigms." The "transformation projects" "re-educate" faculty about the racism of their disciplines. Participants are taught how to make their courses "a site for the negotiation of differences" by incorporating materials on race, gender, and sexuality. Such projects, according to Rosenfelt, have received millions of dollars of support from the Mellon, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the MLA, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and individual colleges.

Needless to say, the proponents of the traditional humanities curriculum have yet to come up with anything so comprehensive and well-funded in its defense. And even where an administration seems to be resisting a demand from the Left, as in Harvard Law School's apparent refusal to comply with professor Derrick Bell's demand that it

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tenure a female black law professor, one can be sure that behind the scenes it is frantically trying to produce the goods.

But the "Reconstructing Higher Education" conference demonstrated that the Left's greatest PR problem is not that its story about the recent changes on campus lacks credibility. It is rather that its storytellers keep botching their lines. Let them so much as open their mouths to deny the charges against them and they only prove that they were not charged severely enough.

One of the milder examples of self-incrimination was provided by Berkeley sociologist Troy Duster. To illustrate how the Right has unjustly linked affirmative action and "political correctness," he posed to the conference a hypothetical exchange between two Berkeley undergraduates, one white, one black. The white student arrives at Berkeley with the expectation that the campus's racial diversity will provide the opportunity for friendship. The black student, however, is interested in greater "administrative acknowledgment" of his presence through more ethnic-studies requirements, the hiring of more black faculty, and increased preferential admissions. When the white student declares herself opposed to affirmative action, the black student charges her with racism. The white responds with the charge of "PC!" and abruptly terminates the dialogue.

To Duster, this mini-drama shows how whites have been brainwashed by the Right. In his view, the black student is not guilty of "political correctness." In calling the white a "racist," he only demonstrated his superior understanding of how "affirmative action is an administrative problem." It is the white, not the black, Duster implies, who acted unreasonably.

The bizarre moral that Duster draws from this little tale becomes somewhat less mystifying in light of his vision of University Utopia, clearly modeled on Beirut. According to Duster, the university should promote the quest for ethnic and racial identity through increased funding of theme houses and other ethnic enclaves, while "affirming safe spaces where students can relate across ethnic divides." In such a world, where ethnic segregation is the norm, and integration an exception confined to clearly demarcated (or demilitarized?) zones, Duster's black student would merely be pursuing the separatist agenda expected of him. It would not be fair to single out his response as "PC" since he is only playing by the rules.

Duster, however, is a moderate compared to the majority of the conference participants. To them, his call for some depoliticized student interaction, however narrowly circumscribed, concedes too much to the hegemonic status quo. The conference rang with the refrains that "strong multiculturalism" is not "about the liberal tolerance of difference, but about the contestation of differences" (Wahneema Lubiano), that it is not "a struggle for balance and fairness, but for democracy and anti-authoritarianism" (Stanley Aronowitz, professor of sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center and founder of the Union of Democratic Intellectuals), and that it is not about "liberal pluralism" (Deborah Rosenfelt).

Another frequently voiced concern was that multiculturalists keep overlooking "class" in their pantheon of essential differences. It appears that if multiculturalists have one fault, it is that in their eagerness to eradicate racism and sexism from higher education, they have been insufficiently mindful of the proper Marxist framework for their analyses. Henceforth, many at the conference argued, multiculturalists must link the "politics of difference" to the "politics of resource distribution." Princeton professor Lubiano was particularly forceful in urging the participants to see themselves as the proletariat in the movement of global capital. She recounted with considerable disdain how the "liberals" at her last battleground against racism—the University of Texas at Austin—were unable to grasp this essential perspective. It is just possible, however, that the reason that the theory of the expropriation of surplus value, say, may be particularly difficult for the multi-

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culturalists, as well as the benighted liberals, to keep in mind is that Marx's iron laws of the market and of class struggle are particularly irrelevant to the privileged world of the American university system.

The conference's rallying cries for greater "political correctness" hide a profound status anxiety. Multiculturalists are terrified by the possibility that they might not be radical enough. Their fear is well justified. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain their romantic personae as revolutionaries when college administrations keep granting their every wish. Even worse, the corporate world has heard their message. According to Michael Warner, professor of English at Rutgers, New Brunswick, and proponent of "Queer Studies," management training manuals constitute the greatest source of materials on multiculturalism and diversity. This revelation sparked a flurry of warnings against becoming "co-opted," that fate worse than death that so often befalls radicals in a democratic, free-market society with the flexibility to respond to political and economic demands.

A good tactic against co-optation is to make ever more outrageous demands on the "system," in the hope that it will finally turn you down. If it does, you have proven that it is the oppressor, you its victim. Thus the extraordinary gall of the academic Left, which declares its mission as the "politicization" of knowledge even as it screams anytime it does not get its way that the Right is intruding on academic freedom. Similarly, what we might call the artistic Left asks for government money with which to spit in the face of the taxpayers. As part of the push-them-to-their-limits offensive against co-optation, panelist Warner proposed a new definition of democracy as "the funding of dissident voices," and declared his disdain for "the monstrous force of the mainstream" that stands in the way of academic and artistic progress.

In an environment so insecure about its revolutionary credentials as was the Hunter College conference, it is not surprising that the few voices of moderation got a very short hearing. Gerald Graff, the George M. Pullman Professor of Humanities, English, and Education at the University of Chicago, and a founder of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, proposed that if the National Association of Scholars declined to participate in Curriculum Transformation Projects and the like, those projects might themselves need rethinking. This subversive thought was quickly banished by Stanley Aronowitz, who reminded the audience, with a rousing dose of obscenities, to maintain an "offensive posture" in the struggle against authoritarianism.

E. Ann Kaplan, professor of English and director of the humanities institute at the State University of New York at Stonybrook, ventured that the academic Left needs "to be sensitive" to the role of the literary tradition in the "American Imaginary." There is "something about the great texts that we are violating," she said. Such sentiments were beneath contempt and drew no response. Now Professor Kaplan, author of *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism & Consumer Culture*, is hardly an academic traditionalist. But apparently even someone who devotes her scholarly energies to investigating MTV and the videos of Madonna, as Professor Kaplan does, can find herself frozen out by her colleagues for being too accommodating to the traditional.

One contrarian suggestion did stir considerable discussion, however. George Yudice, professor of Latin American studies at Hunter College and of cultural studies at CUNY, declared that it was an "oversight . . . not to project a place for the white working class that does not demonize them." Following this observation, the fate of the white male was batted around with gusto. The conferees considered such questions as "Can whiteness be deconstructed?" If it can, "can whites be allowed to construct a new identity?" "How can we get whites to identify with other [preferred] ethnic groups?" This last task would be particularly challenging at the University of California at San Diego, where, according to ethnic-studies professor

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George Lipsitz, an Asian-American student newspaper concluded that the meaning of being Asian-American was to be against white supremacy. Accordingly, the paper put together a pan-ethnic anti-racist coalition, including honorary blacks and Arabs, but presumably no whites.

In response to the question "Should we try to make whites feel comfortable?," Professor Lubiano expressed the sense of the conference when she answered with a resounding negative. It is impossible, she concluded, "to draw whites into" the project of "strong multiculturalism"—"white males are right not to feel good about [multiculturalism]."

The final impression left by the conference had less to do with the substance of the debate about the "academic culture wars," numbingly familiar as it is, than with its style. After hours of being bombarded with impenetrable syntax and utterly predictable slogans, one stumbled out of the conference hall profoundly depressed by the state of academic speech. What is most depressing is that that speech is generated predominantly by the humanities—fields whose object of study is (or once was) expression of the most exalted nature. With the exception of Duster and Aronowitz, all of the academic panelists were literature professors. Their language should have been full of the linguistic and artistic riches that it is their privilege to study. Instead, their talk was composed entirely of vacuous political abstractions. Literature enters academic discourse today only as a symbolic token in a game played on a mock-political turf.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish in July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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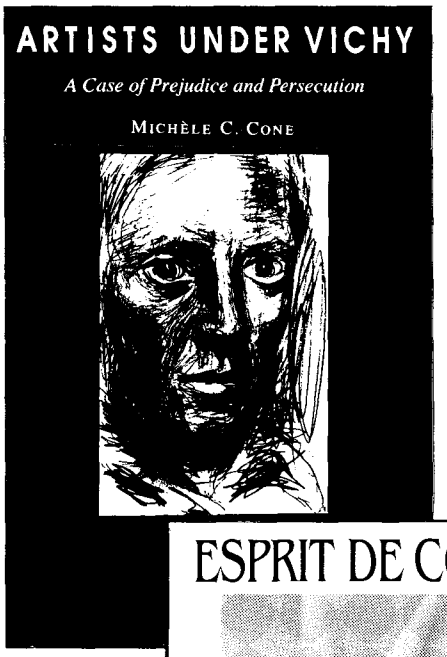

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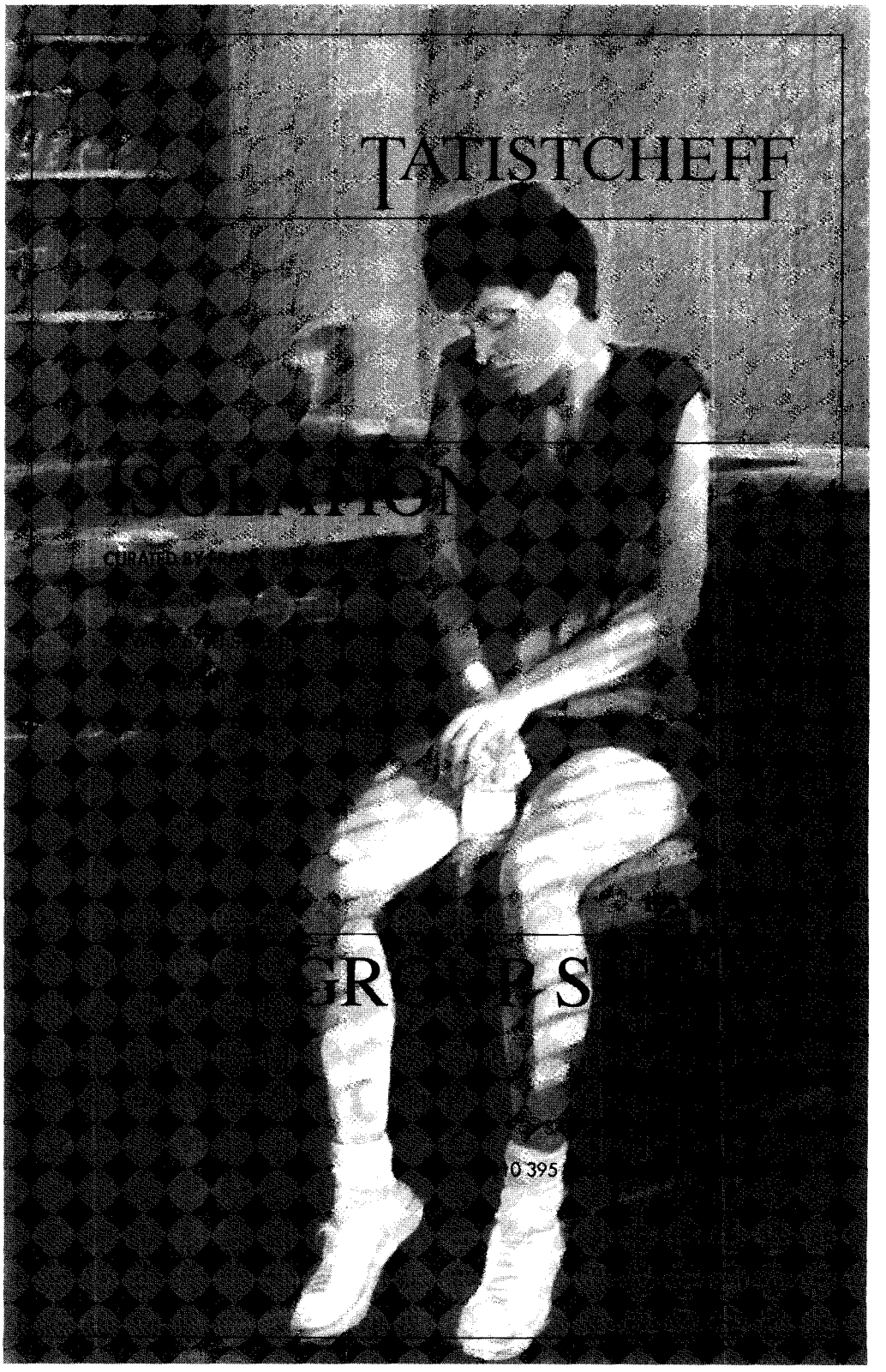

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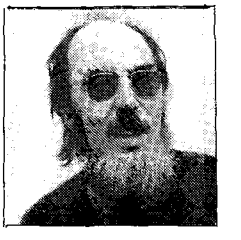

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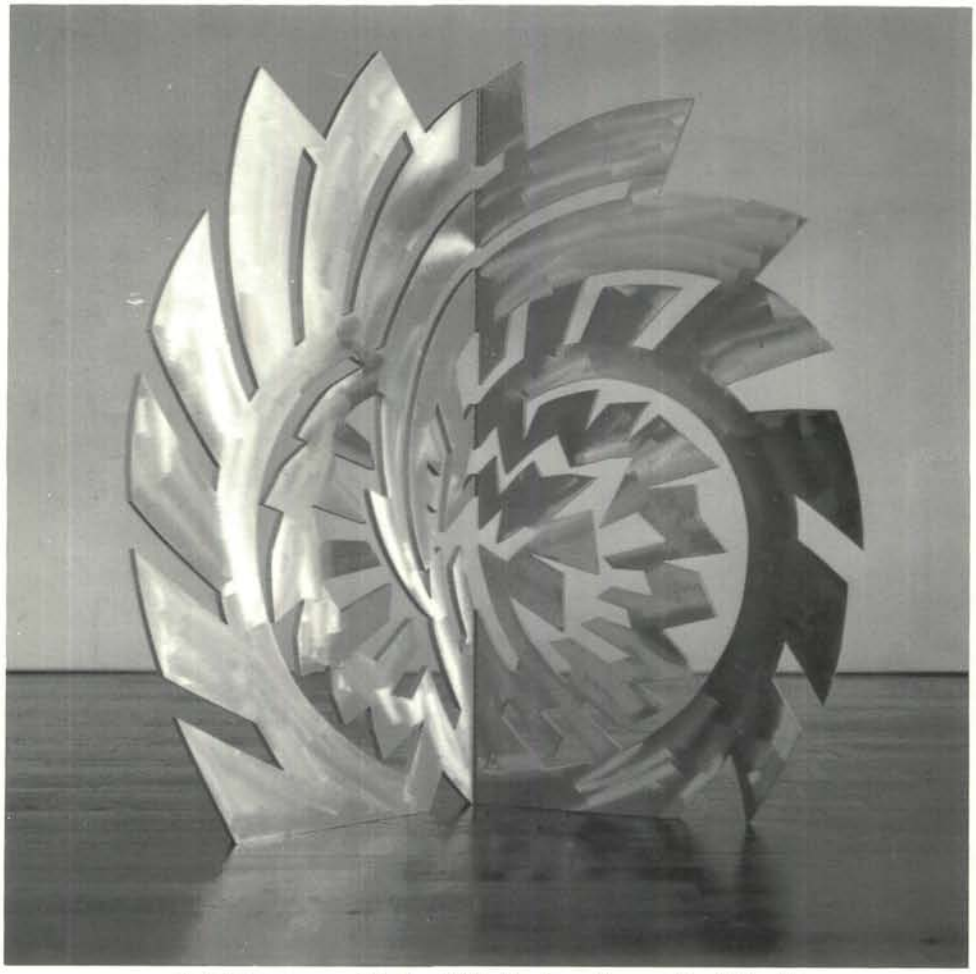

Jack Youngerman, Grinder, 1990, Aluminum Screen, 37 x 38½ x ½"

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